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# DIAGNOSED BUT NOT DEFEATED: THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES WITH PAST HISTORIES OF ENROLLMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION WHO SUCCESSFULLY ATTEND COMMUNITY COLLEGE

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DePaul University  
College of Education

**DIAGNOSED BUT NOT DEFEATED:  
THE EXPERIENCES OF AFRICAN-AMERICAN MALES WITH PAST HISTORIES  
OF ENROLLMENT IN SPECIAL EDUCATION WHO SUCCESSFULLY ATTEND  
COMMUNITY COLLEGE**

A Dissertation in Education  
with a Concentration in Educational Leadership

by

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon

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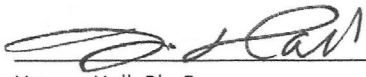
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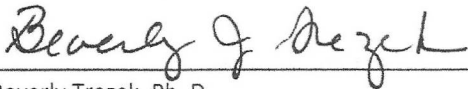
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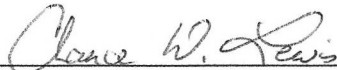
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## **ABSTRACT**

African-American males are disappearing at alarming rates before our eyes through racially driven practices that secure their position in the penal system and special education. Though many scholars in the field of education have highlighted alarming rates of incarceration and overrepresentation in special education for African-American males, society has accepted these practices as a normal standard of living for Black males in this country.

African-American males who have not become part of the penal system and have successfully matriculated into college are considered to be an exception to the rule rather than a standard to live up to. Though a plethora of research exists depicting a dismal state of affairs for African-American males, as evidenced by their lack of academic achievement and overrepresentation in special education, absent from the literature are stories reflecting resilience in the midst of academic and environmental adversities.

The purpose of this inquiry is to explore the experiences of African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education who have demonstrated resilience and are successfully attending a community college. The focus of this study is to examine protective factors that led to their successful transition to a community college.

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## **PREFACE: MY STORY**

It is my belief that my journey to complete this dissertation was designed just for me by God 18 years ago. Throughout this journey, I have come to understand that the work I do with children and their parents is truly anointed work with a higher calling that is much bigger than me. This journey has been filled with countless experiences that have solidified my pastor's sermons, which encourage Christians to make all aspects of work we do serve as a ministry, even on our jobs. As a teacher, one expects to teach and impart knowledge in the lives of students. My beliefs and strong faith have led me to understand that my experiences with students and their families have served as the foundation of this dissertation—all by design and not by chance. The process of writing this dissertation has increased my faith in so many ways that it has heightened my level of advocacy for those unheard and undesired voices of society. Though faced with many obstacles along the way, I have been helped to live one of my favorite Bible verses, James 1:3: "For you know that when your faith is tested, your endurance has a chance to grow." My endurance has grown and allowed me to be the voice of the voiceless.

My professional journey has led me to serve as an educator in the field of special education for the past 18 years. My journey began as a junior high special education teacher in an urban school district in which I experienced my K-8 years. In addition to teaching at the elementary school level, I also served as a department chairperson in special education at a high school in the Chicago Public School System. For 8 of my 18 years in education, I served as the first African-American Director of Special Education in the school district in which I was educated and received my first teaching position. At the start of this school year, I accepted a position as the Director of Special Education and Student Services in the school district where I

currently reside.

My experiences as a teacher in the elementary school and high school settings were very similar. As a pre-service teacher at a predominately White institution, I developed elaborate lesson plans through integrating technology; the position taught me all of the theories and laws that explored the education of students with special needs. Absent from my teacher-preparation process were courses and experiences that prepared me to effectively address the academic, social, and emotional needs of African-American students in economically depressed urban areas. As a first-year teacher and later on in my teaching career, I learned that my racial membership as an African-American woman from a single-parent household did not ensure that I would be successfully impact the lives of Black students.

Within the context of teaching at the elementary and high school levels, I realized that I did not share the same childhood experiences or exposure to the risk factors my students encountered (e.g., exposure to drug use and abuse, gang activity, and family/community dysfunction) that required them to assume the role of an adult on so many levels. An experience I brought to both settings was the importance of establishing and sustaining positive relationships with them. As a product of a single-family, female-dominated home, there were many experiences and opportunities I did not have that my friends from two-parent homes had. In my educational experiences from kindergarten through my undergraduate experiences, I relied very heavily on the support and resources from my former teachers to ensure my success.

In addition to realizing I did not share the same childhood experiences, I also learned that my students had experiences with racism that had already shaped their beliefs and governed how they interacted with White teachers and Hispanic students. My experiences with racism and its detrimental effects did not surface until my undergraduate experience. In my interactions with

my students, I realized that I did not have a point of reference of how adolescents experience racism and how it impacts them in the educational setting. Though I appreciated my time spent at the elementary school because it allowed me to develop my practices and beliefs as an educator, it was my high school experience that really led me to raise questions about the impact of race in the educational setting.

Within the high school setting, I would attempt to counsel students who had repeated referrals to the dean's office. In defense of their behavior, they would state they felt many of their teachers were racist and just didn't like Black people. Students would also remind me to look at the condition of the school and then ask myself if I thought people cared anything about the kids from the neighborhood because the school was not an elite test-entry school. Although I made every attempt to require the students to be responsible for their behavior, I couldn't help but question some of the oppressive practices I observed my colleagues engaging in. One practice that stood out was the fact that the option of attending college was only shared with the kids in honors classes. Within the special education department or other tracks, there was absolutely no discussion or efforts made to ensure students received information about college. During my tenure as the department chairperson, I implemented activities and field trips that exposed the students to the possibility of college.

As my professional endeavors led me to accept an administrative position as a Special Education Supervisor and later as the first African-American Director of Special Education in my childhood district, issues of institutional racism began to have a place in my life as an educator. As one of four supervisors, I observed first-hand the referral process that existed for students qualifying for services. As a supervisor, I facilitated many meetings in which White first-year teachers were at a loss for how to educate "these" children. I was often amazed at how

no one spoke up or spoke out about the reasons why children were being referred. The relationship between the Director of Special Education, teachers, and the teacher's union was quiet until "certain" students didn't qualify for services.

As I transitioned into the role of Director of Special Education, the first of my many tasks was to implement strict ethical practices to deter the number of students being referred for special education for reasons that could not be properly supported. Prior to my transition, students were consistently referred for special education for the inability to "sit still" and follow directions without any documentation of ways in which teachers supported children by making adjustments in their teaching practices or classroom behavior systems to produce more favorable outcomes for students. Within my first two years in the position I received a great deal of resistance from the teacher's union because of the strict procedures I put in place and held my staff accountable for. I often questioned why the level of scrutiny I received was not extended to White directors I had served under as a teacher and as a supervisor in the same school district. As the person ultimately responsible for every referral that moved forward, it heightened my level of advocacy for students and training for staff in the area of the impact of our cultural beliefs in qualifying and sustaining student enrollment in special education.

As an African-American woman who has served as an educator in the field of special education for the past 18 years, I have had the opportunity to experience levels of institutional racism that continues to "shackle" students of color. As an advocate for children, I have had to make unpopular decisions with primarily White teaching staff that have led to more positive educational outcomes for students of color. As a Black woman with a long history of establishing relationships with students and their families, I have experiences that support literature that speaks to the impact of teacher relationships in promoting positive outcomes for Black males;



these relationships have continued into the adult lives of my former students.

It is my deepest desire that this dissertation will inspire teachers with the charge of educating African-American males to examine their beliefs and instructional practices that (consciously or unconsciously) perpetuate institutional oppression. It is also my hope that Black males in special education will be inspired by this work to pursue a college degree.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I would first like to thank God for choosing me as a vessel to impact the lives of young people. My heart is abundantly full of gratefulness for all He has done for me in this journey.

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To Delta Sigma Theta Sorority, Incorporated: Scholarship is what makes us who we are and sisterhood keeps us strong.

## **DEDICATIONS**

*To my mother, Brenda Strickland:* Thank you for the sacrifices you made for your children. This work is not a celebration of me, it is in honor of all you have done for me!

### **In Memory Of**

*Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Lago, Sr.* Thank you for being the most giving and understanding Godparents anyone could have ever be blessed to have. Through your efforts of helping my family on too many occasions to count, I have learned how to be nonjudgmental and blessed in the spirit of giving. Your spirit continues to live in me and your memories will be earthly through Kyle Joseph, in honor of Joseph Lago, Sr.

*Dr. Roosevelt Thomas and Dr. Annie Thompson-Moore.* By God's design and not by mistake you were more than my faculty mentors. Though many years have passed since your death, I still get emotional at the thought of how I would not be where I am today had you not taken the time to make sure I was on the right path educationally and in my life decisions. In your words: "Education is up and coming for Blacks." I am grateful for your advice and presence in my heart.

*Rose Fuentes.* My friend, my biggest supporter! I know you are cheering for me in heaven. "I made it, girlfriend!"

*Mr. William N. Frayser.* A pioneer in educational excellence. As my principal, you required us to be proud of being Black and demonstrated this by showing us how Black men command respect through their presence, intelligence, and educational accomplishments.

## **CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION**

### **Background of the Study**

Mass media portrayal of Black males as symbols of violence has led to society's acceptance of death, violence, and crime as "unavoidable" conditions of growing up as an African-American male in this country. African-American males are disappearing at alarming rates right before our eyes (Ferguson, 2001; Hall, 2007; hooks, 2004; Lewis & Erskinne, 2008; Majors & Billison; Noguera, 2008). Black males who have completed high school and matriculated to college are considered to be the exception, rather than a representation of the standard level of expectation. Urban Prep Academy in Chicago, Illinois, has responded to the crisis affecting African-American males by developing a single-gendered charter school for African-American males from the poorest, gang-infested neighborhoods, placing them on a new track for academic success, leading to exposure and enrollment in college (Cohen, 2010).

According to Urban Prep<sup>1</sup> Academy (2006), the school enrolled a student body of which only 4% of the students were reading at or above grade level. In addition to 4% of its student population reading at or above grade level, incoming students also had past histories of academic failure and disciplinary infractions. However, statistics regarding Urban Prep's success rates indicate that 100% of its 95 seniors graduated and were accepted into college (Cohen, 2010). Urban Prep's formula for success consists of following a structured curriculum with access to mentors and strict disciplinary rules with additional support. Although the success of Urban Prep Academy received a great deal of media exposure, there are many stories of African-American

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<sup>1</sup> Urban Prep Academies is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that operates a network of all-boys public schools, including the country's first charter high school for boys. Urban Prep's mission is to provide a high-quality and comprehensive college-preparatory educational experience to young men that results in graduates succeeding in college. The schools are a direct response to the urgent need to reverse abysmal graduation and college-completion rates among boys in urban centers. While most of Urban Prep students come to the schools from economically disadvantaged households and behind in many subject areas, Urban Prep remains committed to preparing all of its students for college and life.

males who exist without recognition even though they have overcome adversity, attended college, and gone on to become productive citizens (Noguera, 2008). Noguera further asserted that the unpublicized good news is that most Black<sup>2</sup> males are not being incarcerated, committing suicide, or suffering from AIDS.<sup>3</sup> Abundant research exists that depicts the existence of African-American males from a deficit model; however, literature personifying their triumph and realization of positive outcomes is scarce (Davis, 2005; Noguera, 2008).

A great deal of scholarly literature conveys the status of African-American males in school settings and their inability to excel academically (Fultz & Brown, 2008). Indeed, without much effort, one can access any research portal and find abundant literature that depicts Black males as being in a “state of crisis” (Davis, 2003; Erskinsine & Lewis, 2008; Grant & Grief, 2009; Kunjufu, 2005). Recent trends in research have focused on the academic failure of these males and their referrals for special education services (Kujunfu, 2005; Tatum, 2005). One of the greatest adversities impacting African-American males in the general education setting is the number of students referred for special education services based on perceived behavioral and academic deficits (Kunjufu, 2005; Watkins & Kurtz, 2001). Black males are disproportionately identified for special education services and placed in programs for students with behavioral disorders at a rate of three and one half times greater than that of white females (Kunjufu, 2005). Black boys are referred and placed in special education at a rate that makes their existence in general education rare; ten percent of Black males referred to special education return to and maintain enrollment in the general education classroom (Kunjufu, 2005).

Despite obstacles faced by African-American males (e.g., being identified for special education services, exposure to violence, and family structures unequipped to support their

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<sup>2</sup> The terms *African-American* and *Black* will be interchanged throughout this paper.

<sup>3</sup> AIDS stands for acquired immune deficiency syndrome. AIDS is a medical condition. A person is diagnosed with AIDS when the immune system is too weak to fight off infections.

academic success), many of these young men have taken the “road less traveled” and transitioned to college campuses across the country. Existent research literature that conveys the experiences of these males is limited. Furthermore, college enrollment statistics indicate that African-American males demonstrate the highest rates of attrition when compared to any other racial or gender group represented in a college setting (Oesterich & Knight, 2008). Several factors, such as the lack of effective programs that address the academic, emotional, social, and financial needs of African-American males, contribute to their lack of participation in institutions of higher education (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Forston (1997) asserted that many Black males fail to continue successfully in college programs because many programs designed to promote, support, and increase retention rates neglect to understand their academic and psychosocial needs.

In order to gain a better understanding of why enrollment statistics with regard to the status of African-American males enrolled in colleges across the country are dismal, a critical area of possible exploration would be to examine the experiences of Black males that have led to their enrollment in college. Research regarding the successful transition of African-American males from high school to a college setting has suggested that circumstances, which include behaviors (and how one perceives behavior) and experiences that occur in the K-12 educational setting, shape their decisions to pursue a college degree (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Trainor (2008) further suggested that factors related to a successful transition to college are focused on students’ previous school experiences, parents’ educational level, and parents’ socioeconomic status.

Over the last two decades, there has been an increase in the number of students with disabilities represented across the country in college settings (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Attending college is no longer considered to be a privilege extended to the most affluent or

academically equipped students in a graduating class. The possibility of attending college has become more accessible to everyone, regardless of previous academic record or identified disability. Although statistics indicate an increase in the enrollment of students with disabilities in college settings, the journey to complete a college degree continues to be a great task (Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

Present literature addressing the process of transitioning students from high school to a college setting does not convey the experiences of African-American males with past histories of receiving special education services. Although research suggests that increases have been noted in the number of students with disabilities attending college, gaps in the literature remain in terms of research and statistics that represent African-American males with disabilities enrolled in college. Research conveying the transition process for students with special needs has historically focused on the transition of high school students into vocational work programs. Kim and Morningstar (2005) assert that the primary focus of the transition process is a multifaceted process that must consist of more than preparing students for the field of vocation. Kim and Morningstar further assert that “because transition to adulthood is not a discrete phase affecting on the student, it is crucial to focus on the family as a whole in terms of impact and outcomes of the transition process “(p. 93). Lacking in the literature are written accounts of the rich experiences and protective factors of these males that have led to their successful transition into college (Tucker, Dixon, & Griddine, 2010). As such, little is known about successful African-American students (Tucker et al., 2010). Research efforts reporting the experiences of African-American males enrolled in college have focused on retention programs to assist underprepared males and first generation college students (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Given the dearth of existing literature on the transition of African-American males with special needs into college, it is



important to observe the lived experiences of students through multiple lenses, such as being a disabled college student and race issues associated with being Black and male in the United States.

### **Research Problem**

The problem to be explored in this research study will be the need to identify the protective factors that lead to the academic success among African-American males with past histories of receiving special education services under the exceptionality of mental retardation, behavior disorders, and learning disabilities who have successfully transitioned into a community college. Research capturing experiences of being a Black male in America provides a great deal of depth and attention to statistics pertaining to increasingly high drop-out rates, disproportionate rates of special education referrals, and data regarding incarceration rates (Kunjufu, 2001; Tatum, 2005). African-American males encounter many obstacles on their journey to becoming college graduates (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Given the many adversities that exist for African-American male special education students in high school settings, the research focus will be on identifying protective factors that have enabled students to defy the odds and successfully attend community college.

Research depicting stories of resilience and positive outcomes for African-American males in the educational setting are limited in number (Noguera, 2008). Such stories of resilience and positive outcomes for African-American males are also often overshadowed by headlines depicting Black males as the initiators or victims of significant rates of violence and murders (Ginwright, 2006; Giroux, 2005; Ogbu, 1987). Society's portrayal of Black males as symbols of violence through media exposure has created an inaccurate, negative portrayal of Black males (Ginwright, 2006; Giroux, 2005; Ogbu, 1987).

A *Chicago Sun-Times* article, dated November 20, 2010, Matt Stanton, student editor at Whitney M. Young Magnet High School, criticized all of the local news sources for their coverage of Chicago public school students who had been killed during school hours as a result of gunfire. According to Stanton, following the death of a fellow classmate, the headlines simply read, “CPS student becomes latest shooting victim.” Stanton protested the fact that the media’s coverage neglected to mention that the victim attended a prestigious magnet academy and was a good-natured human being. Stanton further requested in his article that the media extend an apology to the families of the deceased and to Chicago public schools for the inaccuracy in reporting the death of his classmate and others, for implying the violent crimes were associated with gang-related activities.

Literature indicating traits of resiliency and positive outcomes has been scarce in academic journals and other avenues of scholarly works in comparison to the research reporting African-American males from a deficit model. Hall (2007) defined resilience as a focus on the social and psychological factors that have helped individuals rise above obstacles that would otherwise add to a dysfunctional state of being. In spite of adversity, resilient individuals are able to pursue dreams and obtain positive outcomes.

One of the greatest obstacles facing Black males is being raised in single-parent, female-dominant homes. Research conducted by Grant and Grief (2009) suggests that being raised by a single mother contributes to the current plight of African-American males. Grant and Grief further maintain that single mothers express a great deal of concern about the need to protect their African-American sons from harm, the temptations of community influences, the lure of crime, and the devastating reality of current statistics regarding incarceration rates for African-American males.

In addition to unfavorable factors that exist in the community, African-American males must navigate through adversity within the school setting. Black males are often educated in a school district deeply rooted in poverty, contributing to a poor schooling experience (Kafele, 2009; Tatum, 2009). Despite adverse conditions within the school setting, some African-American males encounter individuals who have helped them to understand the importance of academic excellence and productive work ethics. Though these traits may appear to be positive, they present a separate set of opposing conditions for African-American males. Often, one of the greatest challenges for Black boys and young men in pursuit of their education is the ridicule from peers who have not embraced the importance of pursuing an education (Cohen, 2010). African-American males often reject performing well in school because it is viewed by peers as acting White or selling out (Labauscher, 2005; Ogbu, 1990).

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to expand the current understanding of African-American male college students with histories of receiving special education services under the exceptionalities of mental retardation, behavior disorders, and learning disabilities in elementary and/or high school by examining the students' transition process to college. Research describing the plight of African-American males in this country conveys a very dismal state of affairs (Kujunfu, 2005). It is critically important to examine factors that have enabled some African-American males to defy adversity and successfully transition to a college.

The transition to college is a very complex process for individuals with disabilities (Denhart, 2008). In addition to factors associated with a traditional disabled student's shift to college, African-American males must navigate through the stereotypical views of teachers, counselors, and school staff, who may derail students' desire to attend college, causing these

young men to reexamine their beliefs in their abilities. Historically, African-Americans have been perceived as inferior, leading to internalized feelings of inadequacy and a development of a fragile state (Jones, 1972; Ogbu, 2004). The reality for African-American males is that these stereotypes have existed for hundreds of years and will continue to exist, entrenched within our society. African-American males must be equipped with the skills to strive toward academic success, despite the obstacles, and to pursue a college education. This study explores ways in which African-American males with past histories of receiving special education services have demonstrated resilience and pressed toward pursuing a college degree.

The primary goal of this research study is to capture the journey students have travelled to acceptance and enrollment in college. Through interviews, I described their family upbringing, academic involvement, high school transition process, and factors that motivated them to attend college. Particular attention was devoted to the perceived impact of the relationships and interactions that took place in high school. An account of their journey to a college campus will contribute to existing literature with regard to the transition process and add to the limited literature that exists about the transition of African-American males to a college campus.

### **Significance of the Study**

Research suggests that the number of disabled students enrolled in college has increased in the last two decades (Denhart, 2008). Although gains have been made in enrollment statistics, efforts to ensure that disabled students have access to participate fully in higher education continue to be a key challenge of secondary education (National Longitudinal Study-2 [NLTS2], 2011). The NLTS2 was a comprehensive study identifying outcomes for students over the six-year period following graduation. Careful examination of NLTS2 study yields discouraging statistics for students with disabilities when compared to non-disabled peers. Within a six-year

period of time following graduation, only 14.6% of disabled students enrolled in four-year universities, compared to 37.4% among their non-disabled peers. Data specifically reflecting the last two years of college enrollment statistics indicates that 11.4 % of disabled students enroll in college versus 34.9% of non-disabled students (NLTS2, 2011). Data compiled during the latter portion of the study indicated that 8.6% of disabled students were enrolled in college versus 34.9% of non-disabled students. Although a great deal of progress has been made in the area of transitioning disabled students to college, there is still much work to be done in the area of transition.

Enrollment rates for African-American males in higher education indicate they are not well represented in higher education. This study will examine various factors that lead to successfully transitioning African-American males from special education classrooms to college campuses, which will provide educators with a framework of necessary skills needed for special education students to compete in a college setting. Research has indicated that the move is often met with inadequate levels of success because transition goals are not always aligned to the student's needs (Rice & Owens, 2004). Special educators will also benefit from knowledge gained from the transition process that will help strengthen the student's Individualized Education Program process in addressing post-secondary goals that are student centered.

### **Research Questions**

This study's primary research question: What factors lead African-American males with past histories of receiving special education services under the exceptionalities of mental retardation, behavior disorders, and learning disabilities to successfully transition to community college? From this question, the following sub-questions were explored in this study:

1. How did the educational experiences influence the decision of African-American males

with a history of special education services to pursue a college degree?

2. What role, if any, did family, peers, and environment play in their decision to attend college?
3. What resources were provided to them during their high school transition meetings?
4. What resources are available for them in college and how do they incorporate these services into their daily academic practices?

### **Methodology**

This inquiry is a qualitative study that utilized interviews to collect data. The purpose of qualitative studies is to learn from the experiences of others through understanding how individuals interpret their experiences and apply them in the context of a social world (Giroux, 2005; Ginwright, 2006). The sample was drawn from male populations of students at a community college located in the western suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. The participants for the study consisted of African-American males who currently attend a community college and who have previously received special education services in elementary school or high school. Initial meetings were individually held with each participant prior to the first interview to ensure they were well informed of the goals and practices to be utilized with the participants in the study.

Utilizing critical race theory as a theoretical framework approach, the narratives gained through several interviews documented the participants' experiences and perceptions of factors that have led to their successful transition to a community college campus. An analysis of the data identified common themes among the participants' experiences and perceptions in an effort to further develop commonalities that contributed to the success of the participants.

## **CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE**

The plight of African-American males in the new millennium is a hot topic of debate and discussion among educators, scholars, political activists, and religious organizations. Scholarly discussion and research surrounding African-American males focus on academic failure and overrepresentation in special education (Kunjufu, 2005; Lewis & Erskinne, 2008). The issue of the lack of academic achievement among African-American males is currently at the forefront of scholarly debate, yet this topic is not new to the research community. Much of the existing research is an extension of previous scholarly work, which identified African-American males as “endangered species” (Gibbs, 1988). Historically, special education has been perceived as the “other” school system for students who are unable to be educated in a traditional school setting due to academic and behavioral deficits. Expectations are not in place for special education students to exit special services and pursue education beyond high school (Kunjufu, 2005). Through literature and media, society is consistently appraised of the odds weighed against African-American males. Research rarely presents studies that highlight the ability of African-American males to successfully move beyond the risks they encounter to pursue an education.

The purpose of this literature review is to provide the reader with research on academic and social conditions associated with being a disabled youth in this country in pursuit of a college degree. The reader will also be provided with research that speaks to the condition of being a disabled African-American male in America. It is the expectation of this researcher that readers will gain a better understanding of how African-American males are conditioned to perceive the pursuit of obtaining a college degree in the early stages of their educational career, with hopes of using this information to improve transition outcomes.

When examining the issues and concerns related to educating disabled African-American males transitioning into college in this country, one must examine their existence from a multi-tiered approach; existence is first viewed from the perspective of a disabled individual and then from the lens of a minority member of society. Completing the requirements necessary to earn a college degree is an indicator of success for disabled individuals in America. Disabled youth who successfully attend college have access to better jobs, higher salaries, and jobs that result in greater job satisfaction (NLTS2; 2011).

Efforts to prepare disabled youth for college center on mandates governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004 (IDEA, 2004). IDEA ensures protections by providing federal mandates for the provisions of identifying and servicing disabled students ages birth through 21 with the goal of promoting positive outcomes (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). A critical provision for students in high school is embedded within the language surrounding transition services. IDEA defines transition services as a set of activities that begin at age 14.5 based upon the individual needs of the students and taking into account the student's preferences, interests, and community experiences (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). The process of transition for students with disabilities at the high school level is complex. Transition serves as a bridge between the secure confines of high school settings and the risks associated with adult life (Gajar, Goodman, & McAfee, 1993).

Research suggests that statistics regarding the enrollment of disabled students in college have improved over the last two decades (Getzel & Thoma, 2008). Notwithstanding improvements in the numbers of disabled youth enrolled in post-secondary institutions, the transition to college is often an obstacle for many. Mandates that once provided optimal levels of protection and services for disabled youth no longer apply to the fullest extent in institutions of



higher education. Colleges and universities have the right to challenge and reject previous reports and diagnosis from secondary institutions (Hatzes, Reiff, & Bramel, 2002). As result, many disabled students are faced with the challenge of pursuing a college degree with limited levels of support. Although obtaining a college degree is perceived to be a guarantee of hope for many disabled students, pursuing a college degree is often a strenuous challenge requiring individuals to demonstrate independence and self-advocacy (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006). For individuals with disabilities, the ability to obtain a college degree is based upon the individual's desire, support, and motivation to succeed.

The transition into college is the road less traveled for many Black males. Literature on the enrollment of these young men into college settings with previous histories of receiving special education services is virtually non-existent in scholarly research. In order to provide the reader with an understanding of the transition process, the perceptions and experiences of African-American males will be explored within an ecological framework to examine the impact of factors associated with being a Black male in society, family dynamics, school environment, and community factors (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Griffin & Allen, 2006).

### **Transition Process for Youth with Disabilities Exiting High School**

Within any school setting, one can find students from various backgrounds with and without disabilities. IDEA (2004) provides protections and services for disabled students from birth through 21 years of age through federal mandates that determine how special education services will be delivered and monitored to ensure positive outcomes for students with disabilities (Martin, Dycke, Ottavio, & Nickerson, 2007). IDEA has served as guiding legislation regulating special education services for more than 20 years. Among many of the components identified in the mandates, educators must, by law, assemble teams to develop an *Individualized*

*Education Program* (IEP) that describes how special education services will be provided and monitored on a yearly basis (Alverson, Naranjo, Yamamoto, & Unruh, 2010). Recent reauthorizations in the legislation have created a new level of accountability for IEP teams given the task of ensuring school districts are in compliance. One area that has been greatly impacted by the reauthorization of IDEA is transition services that promote positive post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Diehm, Palmer, Lee, Schroer, 2010).

Though recent reauthorizations to IDEA have created a new level of accountability in the area of transition services, the concept of transition itself is not a new concept for the field of special education. In order to gain a better understanding of the transition process for students with disabilities, it is imperative to examine the origin of the federal mandates. The transition movement was initiated in the 1980s following the results of research studies examining post-school outcomes for students with disabilities (Landmark, Ju, & Zhang, 2010). Many of the outcomes for students were very discouraging, indicating that a great deal of improvement was drastically needed. Landmark et al. (2010) articulated that the special education community was alarmed by research identifying essential post-school outcomes, such as employment, community integration, and independent living, as unattainable. As a result, transition services for students with disabilities were implemented.

As more attention has been given to the transition needs of students with disabilities, tools to assess outcomes have also become more complex. The federal government now requires state departments of education to report Post School Outcomes (PSO) on a yearly basis (Alverson, Naranjo, & Yamamoto, 2010; Smith, 2007). The federal government assigns indicators to various areas that have been identified as requirements for state departments of education; reporting of PSOs has been defined as Indicator 14 (Smith, 2007; Alverson et al.,

2010). Indicator 14 refers to a performance indicator that requires states to report the percentage of youth no longer enrolled in secondary school that received special education services prior to graduation (Izzo, Narnjo, Yamamoto, & Unruh, 2010). Past practices of compiling graduation data of students with disabilities no longer meet requirements set forth by the federal government.

In order to maintain areas of compliance, school districts must adhere to guidelines requiring data to determine successful transition practices by analyzing post-school outcomes for students with disabilities. School districts are required to collect data annually between April and December; data is gathered through disseminating surveys to former students and the students' current employer to determine if the student has successfully secured employment (Smith & Williams, 2007). Although mandates have been developed and implemented to improve outcomes for students with disabilities, Smith and Williams (2007) assert that accessing information from former students as well as current students is a daunting task requiring that more guidance be given to states to ensure post-outcome statistics are reported accurately.

As transition services have evolved over the years, current mandates outlined in IDEA require school districts to develop a transition plan with post-school transition goals and IEP objectives based upon students' interests, assessment results, and parental input (Martin, Van Dycke, D'Ottario, & Nickerson, 2007). In past years, transition was viewed as a process that primarily focused on addressing students' needs through vocational and life skills training. Gajar et al. (1993) contend that the role of the special education teacher entails providing instruction in job-related interpersonal and academic skills, as well as comprehensive, vocationally relevant services that give learning-disabled students the experiences and skills necessary to increase the coordination of services that will help them successfully transition to the workplace.

Given the new mandates of IDEA, the transition process no longer consists of the exclusive goal of preparing students for the workplace. IDEA requires that transition be viewed as instructional practices that are facilitated through writing and implementing specific goals and objectives that prepare students with disabilities for college (Izzo, Yurrick, & Nagarja, 2010). Efforts to prepare students with disabilities for the twenty-first century extend far beyond outdated assessments such as completing a questionnaire and referring students to books and reference materials that give descriptions of various careers. Efforts to prepare students with disabilities for the future demands of college and the workplace include online programs that integrate reading, writing, and teaching technology skills (Izzo et. al., 2010).

As the mandates of transition have evolved into a multitiered approach, in contrast to a simplistic process that consisted of asking the students basic questions as they were scheduled to graduate, the road of preparing students has become a part of the school experience well before the student's senior year of high school. Research geared toward examining best practices in transition services suggests that effective transition planning begins in middle school (Diehm et al., 2010). Diehm et al. further identify goal setting and self-determination as two critical components that lead to a successful transition process for students. However, despite the results given by Diehm et al., Landmark et al. (2010) suggest that a gap exists in examining research that is scientifically based as opposed to opinion based. Given the fact that the transition process is based on the premise of an individualized process aimed at meeting the needs of students, many factors may exist within the process that are difficult to scientifically test and assign a numerical value to.

Further demonstrating the gaps that exist in reporting factors that lead to successful outcomes for students with disabilities, Landmark et al. (2010) suggest that most research studies

lack empirical value, noting that only the following factors have been empirically substantiated: (a) vocational training, (b) parental involvement, (c) social skills training, (d) paid work experience, (d) follow-up employment services, (e) employer input, and (f) inclusion in general education. Though great advancements in the field of transition have been made, there is still much work to be done in terms of additional methods that are scientifically proven to ensure that transition efforts are successful and can be duplicated over time.

Transition is a vital component of the high school experience (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006). High school graduation symbolizes a time period filled with many hopes, dreams, and challenges as students exit high school and enter into adulthood. The transition process serves as a bridge between the secure confines of high school settings and the risks associated with adult life (Gajar & Goodman, 1993). At the high school level, the transition process is more defined. During the transition process, the IEP team of multiple professionals work together with teachers to write transition goals that addresses the students' community mobility, access to employment, and academic aspirations (Rice & Owens, 2004). In addition to writing goals to be monitored for students, the teacher plays a critical role in the transition process.

As a result of the transition process, students are also introduced to services that will further support them, such as the Department of Rehabilitative Services (DRS). DRS supports students with more delayed academic and social skills in vocational training, job skills, and job shadowing. In addition to providing exposure to rehabilitative services, transition plans also provide students with access to agencies to support counseling services, transportation services, and services that promote leisure and recreational activities (Gajar et al., 1993).

Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA, students with special needs had not been required to fully understand or participate in the transition process (Kim & Morningstar, 2005). Students

were invited to meetings, signed in to acknowledge their attendance, and acted as silent participants in the meeting. Martin et al. (2007) examined amounts of verbal interaction from students at IEP meetings to determine the level of student engagement as contrasted with teacher-led IEP meetings. Findings from the study indicated that students verbally interacted at IEP meetings at a rate of 3% compared to teacher-led verbal interactions at 51%.

The reauthorization of IDEA in 2004 strengthened student engagement in the transition process by adding student strengths and the development of measureable post-school outcomes (Landmark et. al., 2010). The purpose of this revision was to promote self-determination by holding the students accountable for realizing and articulating their strengths and weaknesses in the academic setting. Morningstar et al. (2010) further assert that higher degrees of self-determination increase the degree of success in post-secondary institutions, especially in the area of psychological empowerment.

Given the emphasis dedicated to the area of self-determination, many researchers have explored the issue and provided recommendations to validate the importance of self-determination in the transition process (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; May & Stone, 2010). Without question, academic skills are important factors to be considered in the transition process. However, non-academic areas, such as self-determination and self-advocacy, are critical factors in the transition process for students with disabilities (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006). Trainor (2008) supports the positions of self-determination and self-advocacy as crucial components in the transition process. Trainor further challenges educators to acknowledge the fact that cultural differences among students of color make it difficult to establish universal terms to be utilized across settings in the transition process; variations in languages of students of color create a space where words such as *self-determination* may translate into different meanings based upon

cultural contexts. Further, Deschler and Schumaker (2006) assert that in order to successfully transition into the world of adulthood, students with disabilities must be provided with experiences that will allow them to engage with peers while maintaining the ability to resist peer pressure. Consistent demonstration of these self-advocacy skills will prove to be critical factors associated with successful transitions (Deschler & Schumaker, 2006).

When examining the efficacy of the transition process for most disabled students, research suggests that beginning transition services for students at age 14 is too late in the developmental process for some youth (Eisenman, 2007; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002; Konrad & Test, 2004). Eisenman (2007) further identified the Self-Directed Learning Model (SDLM), which consists of goal setting, taking action, and adjusting the goal or plan as a strategy that can be implemented as early as elementary school.

Due to the lack of family exposure to careers and limited experiences for youth to interact with individuals who have attended college, many disabled African-American youth in urban areas have unrealistic views of what the future holds (Bell, 2010). Bell (2010) further asserts that African-American youth have limited exposure to role models they can touch and cannot continue to rest on the laurels of heroes of the past as their only guide. One of the greatest challenges facing African-American males in the transition process is the issue of preparation for college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2001; Tatum, 2009). African-American students are provided with limited information about college opportunities in general. Studies conducted by Noeth and Wimberly (2001) concluded that African-American students utilized college-planning software 45% of their time in their efforts to prepare for college, suggesting that they lack an understanding of the essential components required to properly prepare for college.

In addition to issues related to poor preparation, Black students face additional obstacles

that impede their ability to transition to college at rates equal to or surpassing White students. Black students are often educated in urban schools that disproportionately represent high dropout rates, low expectations in the area of student achievement, and high turnover rates in certified staff and administrators (Noeth & Wimberly, 2001). For African-American males in particular, their access to academic courses to adequately prepare them for college is limited due to the high incidence of inappropriate placements in special education that promote removal from the rigor of the general education curriculum and foster an educational setting plagued by lower educational expectations (“Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland’s African-American Males,” 2007). Maryland’s Task Force also maintains that African-American males are not a part of any conversations related to advanced-placement classes focused on appropriately preparing students for college.

Literature regarding the transition process for students of color is limited, but is consistent in conveying the complexity of the process. Research suggests that special education students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds are overrepresented in special education, have limited access to post-secondary opportunities, and are underrepresented in higher education (Oesterrich & Knight, 2008). Existing laws about transition were developed to ensure that one’s race would not determine the level or quality of services given to disabled students. Oesterrich and Knight (2008) suggested that students’ social and cultural capital creates differences in the students’ identities and pursuit of college, and that transition efforts should highlight these differences through empowering students to overcome obstacles rooted in racism and classism. Trainor (2008) contributed to the existing body of literature regarding cultural and social capital by suggesting that these factors serve a critical role in the transition process for students of color. Trainor further asserted that efforts aimed at improving post-secondary



outcomes for students of color must examine issues of inequitable outcomes and gaps in achievement that exist for marginalized groups. Though faced with many challenges in the high school setting, an effective transition process for African-American students will enhance the ability to become advocates from a legal perspective.

Efforts aimed at ensuring success for culturally diverse students must incorporate the importance of addressing economic limitations that exist for African-American students. Research documents that financial status is a predictor of higher education (Trainor, 2008).

The transition process of African-American males in poverty-stricken urban school districts must ensure that all necessary documents and evaluations are in place to verify their disability and the need for services in the college setting. Section 504 Act of 1973 and the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 greatly impact African-American males by requiring them to pay for appropriate evaluations to document their disability if special educators at the high school failed to ensure that their records were up to date and in compliance before the student exited high school (Oestrich & Knight, 2008). Oestrich and Knight also posited that the transition process for African-American students must ensure that students understand that their enrollment in college is part of a larger community legacy that has been the result of efforts of other African-American students and will continue to serve as an example for future students to model. Understanding one's role and contribution in attributing to their success is critical for students to grasp. Diehm et al. (2010) suggested that in order for the transition process to be successful, students must truly be aware of their strengths and weaknesses and have a realistic plan of what needs to be in place to strengthen areas of weakness.

The final component of the transition process for high school students is the development of the Summary of Performance (SOP). Students receiving special education services when

exiting high school who have earned a regular diploma or have reached the maximum age of eligibility are required to have an SOP document drafted in accordance with the reauthorization of IDEA (Martin et al., 2007). Prior to the reauthorization of IDEA, school districts were required to evaluate students prior to their exit from high school; current mandates afford school districts the opportunity to determine if an evaluation is warranted. The SOP is separate from the IEP document and serves as a tool in determining if an evaluation is warranted. Unlike an IEP team, only the parent, case manager, and student are required to attend this meeting (Martin et al., 2007). Given trends in society that promote more acceptance of individuals who are disabled, continued efforts need to be made to increase the number of disabled students of color who successfully transition from high school to college.

### **Disabled Youth Enrolled in College**

Although research efforts have reflected increased rates of college enrollment for students with disabilities (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002), the needs of many learning-disabled students are not met. This is often the result of staff either underestimating the student's ability to pursue college in the transition process or feeling the student's delay is mild enough to enable them to "pass," in which case, students are encouraged to sit quietly and not make it known that they are disabled (Brown et al., 2003). Disabled students may feel powerless as opportunities to truly express their needs are stripped away.

Statistics indicating enrollment figures for students with disabilities indicate that 55% of students with disabilities enroll in post-secondary schools, compared to 62% of non-disabled students; post-secondary schools may be identified as vocational schools, business technical schools, or vocational programs (NLTS2, 2011). Statistics from the study also indicated that 39% of disabled students attend college versus 60% of non-disabled students. Clearly, statistics

indicate a gap exists when comparing disabled students' college enrollment with non-disabled students. Disabled students present with a multitude of disabilities that range from cognitive to physical disabilities. Trainor (2008) reported that out of 63% of students with disabilities who have ever enrolled in college, students with hearing impairments represented the highest percentages of students, with 71% represented, and students with multiple disabilities represented the lowest percentage, with 31% represented. Although the data suggest that 63% of students with disabilities enroll in college, efforts to improve these percentages are greatly needed.

### **Federal Mandates for College Students with Disabilities**

Given the decline in our current economy, college is no longer considered a privilege; it is necessary to promote the ability to sustain oneself economically (Thomas, 2008). However, for students with disabilities, attending a college or university is often the “road less traveled.” Many students and families are unaware of laws and services afforded to them at post-secondary institutions. From a historical perspective, legislative mandates and laws have guaranteed the rights of individuals with disabilities for decades. The Rehabilitation Act of 1968-1980, enacted by Congress, was directed toward promoting a positive quality of life for individuals with disabilities. As a result of these efforts, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was developed, ensuring that programs and activities receiving federal funding do not engage in discrimination based on an identified handicap (Kortering, Julnes, & Edgler, 1990).

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act provides a great deal of promise for disabled individuals seeking to pursue a college degree. The Section 504 Act ensures that individuals are not discriminated against solely on the basis of being identified as disabled and that reasonable accommodations are made within the college setting. However, colleges reserve the right to

establish what is reasonable (Kortering et al., 1990). Embedded in the language of the act, institutions are not required to make significant modifications (Kortering et al., 1990). In a university in the Midwest, learning-disabled students requested the right to a course substitution in the area of foreign language upon the basis that their disability prevented the process of language acquisition. A final court ruling indicated that the institution was not required to grant the course substitution but was to review their policies regarding accommodations for students with disabilities (Phillips, Javorsky, & Sparks, 2003).

Consistent within the mandates in higher education are procedures regarding the assessment process for students with disabilities. The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) is responsible for establishing consistent procedures in the area of servicing students with disabilities on college campuses across the country. AHEAD ensures that students seeking accommodations are formally assessed with measures used in every college and university across the country (Denhart, 2008). Formalized tests are then used to determine if reasonable accommodations can be made when warranted. When seeking assistance from the university, students must provide copies of the last formal evaluation completed prior to graduation; a review of these reports determines if the student will continue to receive some level of specialized services (Denhart, 2008).

The journey from high school to college is a life-changing experience for any young adult. College provides many formal and informal opportunities to learn the skills needed to be a productive member of society. As the journey to independence becomes more complex, disabled students experience even greater challenges in the area of self-advocacy (Getzel & Thoma, 2008; Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Research with regard to characteristics of students with disabilities who successfully transition to college suggests that self-advocacy is a critical skill that disabled

students must understand and fully demonstrate (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

## **Experiences of Disabled College Students**

### **Community College Experiences**

As a country, America no longer holds the belief that a high school diploma solidifies employment (Lotkowski, Robbins, & Noeth, 2004). Although pursuing an education beyond high school has become a prerequisite for obtaining access to a quality-filled life, the decision to attend college is not always an automatic one for disabled students. For many students of color as well as economically disadvantaged students, the road to a college education begins with enrollment in a community college (Long & Kurlander, 2009).

Though a vast amount of research exists examining the experiences of disabled students enrolled in four-year colleges, a gap exists in capturing their experiences at the community college level. Given the presence of students of color at most urban community colleges, it is necessary to explore the community college experience as a critical component in the lives of disabled Black young men in pursuit of a college degree. This section of the literature review will examine the experiences of disabled students with different lenses, first describing research related to the experiences of students enrolled in community colleges and concluding with the experiences of disabled students enrolled in four-year institutions of higher education.

Community colleges provide opportunities for many students from culturally diverse and financially suppressed backgrounds to pursue a college degree. The mission of the community college as an institution is to serve all segments of society, regardless of their academic or financial status (Liu, Gomez, & Yen, 2009). Hagedon and Maxwell (2002) suggested that many students' decisions to attend community college are due to community colleges being the only

viable choice at the time. Community college students have high aspirations, despite living very complicated lives filled with family- and job-related responsibilities (Hagedon & Maxwell, 2002; Liu et al., 2009). National studies investigating enrollment trends in higher education suggest that nearly half of all minority, first-generation, undergraduate students from low-income homes attend community colleges (Long & Kurlaender, 2009).

Given their open admission policies, their low tuition rates, and their ability to offer remedial classes, community colleges often serve as the only viable options for minority, low-income, first-generation, college students. Indeed, for many African-American students, community colleges represent the only option to pursue a college degree. Flowers, Bridges, and Moore (2011) contended that African-American students encounter a multitude of obstacles (e.g., poverty, inadequate public school experiences, poor school counseling, and inadequate parental support) that create obstacles to obtaining college degrees.

Community colleges and universities have become more aware of the obstacles that exist in high schools and have responded by establishing developmental studies programs (Flowers et al., 2011). These programs afford African-American students opportunities to acquire successful academic study habits and assist students with decisions regarding financial aid and course selections. As such, developmental studies programs serve as a bridge that aligns high school experiences with college requirements and expectations (Flowers et al., 2011).

Attributes such as open enrollment and availability of remedial courses designed to meet the needs of many diverse student populations do not exempt community colleges from many of the discouraging student outcomes, evidenced by enrollment statistics, that are not germane to four-year institutions. Despite commendable programs, research suggests that community colleges have failed to deliver educational opportunities to minority, low income students

(Hagedon & Maxwell, 2002). Long and Kurlaendar (2009) postulated that students enrolled in community colleges are at risk of exposure to the “community college penalty,” in which community colleges create a penalty for students by diverting them away from coursework that immediately prepares them for four-year institutions. This penalty stems from the institutional promotion of vocational coursework and support for non-traditional patterns of attendance (i.e., delayed entry, part-time enrollment, combining employment with schooling), which deter students’ progress.

Although community colleges are viable assets to many students, they are not exempt from challenges that affect their ability to sustain an affordable quality educational experience. One of the many challenges that community colleges must address is the ability to increase student success, as reflected by graduation rates (Nitecki, 2011). Nitecki further asserted that in response to low success rates, many community colleges have formulated institutional solutions that include strengthening student support services. Community colleges are not immune from attrition rates that lead to discouraging graduation rates and low levels of student satisfaction.

In a study examining the campus environment as it relates to student attrition, Schuetz (2005) determined that half of all first year community college students exit the institution before their second year. Further findings of the study indicated that 40% of all community college students drop out, skip academic terms, and enroll in other institutions. In an effort to identify factors that lead to such discouraging rates for community colleges, Schuetz (2006) developed a list of seven obstacles, identified as barriers to student success. These obstacles included (a) bureaucratic hurdles, (b) confusing choices, (c) student-initiated versus college-initiated guidance, (d) limited accessibility to counseling services, (e) poor advice from staff, (f) delayed detection of mistakes, and (g) poor handling of demands.

As community colleges attempt to develop efforts to improve attrition statistics, efforts must also consider non-academic factors, such as students' employment obligations, responsibilities within the family structure, and community factors that impede the academic success of students (Lotkowski et al., 2004). Finkelstein (2002) suggested that many efforts to improve attrition rates at community colleges fail due to their inability to understand the lives of students and the importance of students knowing that their voices are welcomed and heard. Despite the many challenges facing community colleges that impact the student success rates, many disabled students successfully matriculate from community college settings to four-year institutions.

#### **Four-Year Colleges**

For many years, individuals with special needs have had to fight for educational opportunities that are easily afforded to non-disabled students. Although enormous gains have been made in educating individuals with special needs, adults with special needs in pursuit of furthering their education still encounter many barriers within institutions of higher education (Hatzel, Reiff, & Bramel, 2002). For many disabled students, the road to accessing accommodations in higher education is met with a great deal of frustration (Denbart, 2008; Hatzel et al., 2002; May & Stone, 2010). Institutions of higher learning are required to adopt AHEAD guidelines in efforts to ensure accommodations are consistent throughout colleges across the country (Hatzel et al., 2002).

Embedded within the requirements of AHEAD is language that speaks to issues of assessment and diagnosis of students with disabilities. Procedures require students to be diagnosed using formal assessments to identify cognitive abilities. Diagnosing a disability in the college setting continues to be an issue of critical debate. Sparks, Phillips, and Javorsky (2003)



asserted that many diagnosed cases of learning disabilities in higher education are confirmed due to the student's inability to meet the foreign language requirements, rather than previous histories of academic concerns.

Although AHEAD was designed to assist students, the associated regulations present an obstacle in that they afford universities the opportunity to reject evaluations done during the student's high school experience (Hatzes et al., 2002). The reality is that it is difficult to shed the image of being an "uneducable" student; special education has long been considered to be the warehouse for those unable to succeed. As a result of interactions with staff and students on many college campuses, disabled college students feel misunderstood, incompetent, and have been led to believe that they are intellectually inferior (Denhart, 2008). Denhart (2008) further asserted in her experience as a disabled college student and a researcher that feelings of being misunderstood impact one's desire to seek accommodations when needed, to which she attributes lower grades and higher drop-out rates.

Society has proven itself to be a very judgmental entity that does not easily embrace the differences in others. Disabled students have been acculturated in elementary school and high school settings to "blend in" with their non-disabled peers to minimize the risk of rejection, as a coping strategy (May & Stone, 2010). As these students transition to college, it is difficult to shed these coping strategies and access the support needed to further their education successfully. May and Stone (2010) suggested that fears of encountering prejudice often influence disabled students against disclosing their disability to college staff and faculty.

In addition to encountering harassment, May and Stone (2010) further maintained that learning-disabled students often work themselves into a state of fatigue and exhaustion because their disability requires them to work twice as hard as their peers to maintain their grades. Many

students with learning disabilities have documented levels of average to above average intelligence, but demonstrate a deficit in one or more academic areas. Research conducted at three public universities concluded that learning-disabled students have their personal greatest deficits in reading (May & Stone, 2010); however, many of the participants in the study indicated that their identified deficits in reading greatly impacted them in other areas as well.

The struggle for many disabled students rests with completing academic tasks in the same manner and timeframe as their peers. Students with learning disabilities may need to develop elaborate charts and other graphic organizers to assist with formulating their thoughts in an organized manner. Students may also need to engage in multiple levels of revisions to their work. All of these efforts contribute to feeling overwhelmed with course requirements, leading to feelings of self-doubt among disabled students (Denbart, 2008).

### **Ecological Examination of African-American Males**

Embedded within this literature review are the experiences of disabled individuals attending colleges and universities throughout the country. Research that speaks to the experiences of African-American males who have transitioned from special education programs to a college campus successfully are not adequately represented in scholarly research. In order to capture their experiences, this study will present their lives from multiple perspectives: African-American males as a cultural condition, educational practices for African-American males, and factors leading to successful transition from high school to college. Although there may be many influences that contribute to the rate in which Black males transition into and successfully complete college, this inquiry will have three general areas that will assist in giving voice to those males who have successfully transitioned to a college campus.

## **Cultural Conditions of African-American Males**

Many American scholars have argued that there are conditions associated with being a Black person in this country (Brown, 2008; Lewis & Erskinne, 2008; Noguera, 2008). Research has described these ideas and assumptions by providing a theoretical framework referred to as the *cultural condition* of being Black (Gabbidon & Patterson, 2006; Hall, 2007). The cultural condition of being a Black person in this county is a critical area to examine in this literature review because it provides a foundation for understanding the complexities surrounding educating African-American males. Understanding these complexities places a greater importance on the significance of the accomplishments of African-American males who excel despite barriers. In order to understand and apply what scholars refer to as the cultural condition of being a Black man in America and the impact of this condition in the educational setting, it is imperative to explore research that speaks to the historical perspective of conditions associated with the daily experiences of being a Black person in America.

For decades, scholars from psychological, anthropological, and educational disciplines have conducted studies with the goal of identifying factors that contribute to the reasons why African-Americans demonstrate difficulty in learning and adjusting, as well as contributing productively to society (Dancy & Brown, 2008). From a historical perspective, the cultural conditions associated with being a Black person in America can be traced back to the arrival of Blacks in this country through documented slave trades from the coasts of Africa to America (Gabbidon & Patterson, 2006). As a result of slave trades that existed for hundreds of years, African Americans were subjected to physical and mental abuse that compromised their quality of life. Centuries after the slave trade ended, stress continues to be a part of the contemporary African-American experience (Gabbidon & Patterson, 2006; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005).

Scholarly debate and discussion have evoked many profound perspectives regarding conditions associated with being a Black person in America. Obiakor and Beachum (2005) described the conditions existing in Black America with the following remarks:

The condition of being Black in America means that one will likely endure more wounds to one's self-esteem than others and that capacity for self-doubt born out of these wounds will be compounded by the Black race's reputation for inferiority. Black skin has more dehumanizing stereotypes associated with it than any other skin color in America. (p. 19)

Gabbidon and Patterson (2006) referred to the cultural conditions that exist in Black America as "living while Black." In their analysis of conditions associated with being a Black person in America, Gabbidon and Patterson (2006) further argued that being Black in America is hazardous to one's health. Centuries of exposure to racism and alienation have led to manifestations of increased health-related problems such as heart failure and high blood pressure, as well as mental illness.

Although one may suggest that conversations of health-related issues are not something African-American youth may encounter in the scope of their school day, several scholars have suggested that racism and discrimination experienced by African-American boys lead to feelings of powerlessness and depression (Gabbidon & Patterson, 2006; Obiakor & Beachum, 2004). Black males are members of a society that continues to be plagued by the effects of racism that cannot be omitted from the tapestry of this country (Jones, 1972; Lewis & Mueller, 2007; Obiakor & Beachum, 2004). These boys and young men continue to be faced with the task of navigating through generations of oppression that contribute to the cultural conditions of being a Black person in America.

African-American youth exist within a society filled with cultural conflicts that result from society's view of their existence and the struggle for "New Millenium" youth to evolve as

culturally expressive and relevant members of society. Ginwright (2006) described the evolution of today's youth as a process in which youth struggle against becoming caught up in complex systems of control and containment perpetuated by stereotypes and unjust public policies. As African-American youth struggle for identity, their identity is formed and expressed through new or revived cultural forms, such as rap music and the hip hop industry.

As the formation of a new self develops, African-American youth celebrate aspects of their African culture by embracing basic African philosophy that informs values, attitudes, and customs (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). Laubscher (2005) postulated that Euro American values and traits found in African-American men are not owned as African, but seen as a betrayal of African worldviews. Unfortunately, the critical cultural journey in which African-American males engage on the road toward self-exploration and identity formation is often viewed as defiance that ultimately impacts their existence in their community and educational settings. Adding to the literature addressing cultural conflicts that African-American males experience in school settings, Bonner (2000) suggested that Black males are culturally out of sync with the dominant culture's expectations. Bonner expounded upon this position by providing the following opinion:

In order for African-American students to fit the mold of what teachers deem acceptable, conduct means relinquishing their cultural nuances that would identify the students as part of a racial group. When Black students behave in ways contrary to Black cultural norms, they are treated as individuals. (p. 647)

The element of culture is a critical component to explore and discuss in any scholarly debate or conversation regarding the existence of African-American males in this country. Some would argue that America is the land of opportunity and that one's culture should not be discussed from a deficit model in terms of the ability to succeed. However, for African-American males, the concept of culture is an element that remains a constant factor in examining their

condition of being Black in America.

Conveyed within the literature describing the impact of conditions associated with being Black in America, attention is given to negative psychological factors that have historically developed over time, such as feelings of inferiority, fragility, and self-hatred (Bell, 2010; Freeman, 2006; Tatum, 2005). African-American youth are not exempt from experiencing negative psychological factors associated with being Black. Tatum (2005) supported the theory of African-Americans males' feelings of inferiority by suggesting that Black males feel invisible in today's society. There are many factors that may contribute to feelings of inadequacy and inferiority among African-American males. Freeman (2006) argued that centuries of having their talents underutilized have resulted in African Americans being negatively impacted in the areas of psychological well-being, self-confidence, and self-esteem. Centuries of exclusion have led African Americans to either embrace or resist the notion that their talents are not worthy of recognition in mainstream America. Subconsciously, some African Americans have accepted exclusion as a conditioned response in our society resulting in the perception of others becoming their reality (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005).

Obiakor and Beachum (2005) further conveyed that the formation of self reflects past experiences with family, school, community, and government entities. African-American youth exist within the context of a complex society consisting of multitudes of barriers that they must navigate through on their journey through the educational system and interactions within the community in pursuit of crossing the bridge from childhood into adulthood. The reality is that most will live, they will survive, but at what cost to their self-esteem, their psyche, their spirit, and their overall well-being? If educational systems strive to be successful in their endeavors to educate and even liberate African-American males, they must consider the psychological and

emotional scarring that has occurred as a result of being a poor Black male in America (Tatum, 2005).

### **Psychological Factors Associated with the Black Experience in America**

Cultural conditions associated with being a Black person in this country have led to a series of documented experiences that have evolved into a theoretical framework described as Black psychology. Research conveyed by Jones (1972) provided several theories for understanding the psychological effects of being a Black person in America throughout his text, *Black Psychology*. Jones referred to Black psychology as the foundation that provides a theoretical perspective conveying the impact of racism and alienation that continues to plague schools today. Jones further stated that the history of Blacks' restrictive actions has promoted perceptions of inferiority, leading Blacks to internalize feelings of inadequacy and fragility.

Given the advancements that African-American males have made in many facets of society, from medicine to politics, some would debate that much of the research provided by Jones is outdated and cannot sustain merit in the twenty-first century. Current research into psychological factors that impact the educational and overall well-being of African Americans supports theories presented by Jones several decades ago. Social science literature and psychology scholars characterize African-American males as individuals with a multitude of problems, such as exhibiting dysfunctional violent behaviors, leading to an inability to function in society (Laubscher, 2005).

In a society in which Black males are inundated with negative images of themselves through avenues of visual media, they begin to embrace negative racial identities. Research in the area of self concepts of African-American students has posited that as a result of one's perception of self, the perception becomes the reality (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). Obiakor and

Beachum further argued that the formation of self consists of past experiences with family, school, community, and government entities. Examining self-concept is a critical factor in developing an understanding of why African-American males associate themselves within a negative context.

Lott (2008) suggested that the concept of racial identity contributes to the psyche of Black students. Lott further suggested that one of the first psychological stages that Blacks engage in is pro-White attitudes that result in their belief systems that reject identifying with being Black. Throughout history, Blacks have been conditioned to believe that any attributes of being Black are associated with negative treatment in this country. Bell (2010) asserted that the treatment that Blacks have received from White America during critical historical timeframes has contributed greatly to the development of self-hatred. Bell further suggested that negatively held beliefs by the dominant culture have restrained the academic potential of African-Americans. Discussions regarding beliefs and perceptions are critical areas to examine within the educational setting because perceptions may quite often influence the method in which students are perceived.

As with many psychological factors, such as inferiority and fragility, Blacks have also embraced a deep-rooted history of self-hatred that continues to manifest itself globally (Charles, 2003). Charles (2003) argued that feelings of self-hatred are manifestations of lingering psychological scars resulting from the impact of slavery. As such, treatment endured during slavery brainwashed Blacks to hate themselves by elevating values of the majority over African descendants (Charles, 2003). Historical events of slavery are not just isolated to America; other countries heavily populated with African descendants also have historical accounts of slavery. Globally, the psychological impact of slavery can be evidenced through research conducted in



Jamaica by analyzing data from a rising health crisis; Jamaicans dangerously engage in bleaching their skin in attempts to detach from African descent and embrace White mainstream features (Charles, 2003). Nationally and internationally, Blacks have been psychologically conditioned to reject black or brown skin and embrace perceptions of negative attributes that others attach to one's dark complexion.

### **Cultural Conditions and Psychological Factors Impacting African-American Youth**

Research suggests that cultural conditions associated with being a Black person in America have led to psychological factors tremendously impacting African Americans (Obiakor & Beechum, 2005). Although the literature speaks to this impact from the perspective of adults, African-American youth also experience these conditions and have been exposed to these same detrimental effects in their neighborhoods and schools. Bonner (2000) purported that Black students must work diligently to ensure they do not reflect stereotypes associated with being Black; these acts of disassociation result in self-hatred, low self-esteem, and low achievement. The impact of cultural conditions and psychological factors affecting African-American youth today primarily focuses on African-American males. Lewis and Erskinne (2008) suggested that the current conditions of society have elevated the need to continue to address this condition of being a young Black male more aggressively in order meet the needs of a population that is increasingly becoming extinct.

Efforts focused upon accessing a level of understanding of cultural conditions that exist in the lives of today's African-American youth, one must take a step back and first explore the experiences that have led to the development of their perspectives and practices. Youth today reside in a world where they are viewed as the dark force that inhabits the country in which we live (Grossberg, 2005). As a result of this view, Grossberg suggested that society suffers from a

term he described as *ephebiphobia*, the fear of teenagers. The existence of African-American youth in society presents them as an even darker force than the average White or Latino youth. Alexander (2012) contended that society has become accustomed to the nightly news displaying images of African-American males being arrested, and as such, crime has become racially coded for associating Black youth with violence. It has become socially accepted to interpret the “War on Crime” as a war on African-American youth.

Alexander (2012) provides a deeper analysis of the perceived war on crime in the text, *The New Jim Crow Mass Incarceration in the Age of Colorblindness*. Alexander contended that publicized legal tactics designed to implement a “War on Drugs,” which is to be racially understood as a “War on Poor Communities of Color.” Alexander further expressed the following opinions regarding legal practices implemented with the alleged intent to decrease crime:

African Americans—particularly in the poorest neighborhoods—are subjected to tactics and practices that would result in public outrage and scandal if committed in middle-class neighborhoods. In the drug war, the enemy is racially defined. Law enforcement methods have been employed almost exclusively in poor communities of color, resulting in jaw-dropping numbers of African Americans and Latinos filling our nation’s prisons and jails every year. (p. 99)

Black males exist in a society that has become content with policies that continue to threaten and diminish their livelihood. Given the historical existence of racism and racially motivated agendas in this country, it is difficult to arrive at a solution to this generational curse of marginalization and mistreatment in this country. Though the solution cannot be arrived at easily, some scholars have argued that the root of the problem exists in the public school system, through its role in failing to meet the academic and cultural needs of Black males that results in an overrepresentation in special education programs.

The next portion of this literature review will be organized as follows. In the next section, I will discuss literature that speaks to the cultural needs of Black males and cultural conflicts that exist in the school setting. I will then discuss how existing cultural conflicts are perceived within the deficit model that leads to Black males being referred for special education services. Finally, I will provide a review of literature that identifies correlations in special education programs and prison systems. The presentation of literature in the above-mentioned context will provide a greater understanding of the complexities that compose the educational experiences of many Black males. Dancy and Brown (2008) purported that the educational experiences of African-American males that take place in the K-12 setting determine their outlook and aspirations to pursue an education beyond high school.

### **Educational Experiences for African-American Males in K-12 Settings**

Academic failure has become a term heavily associated with the performance of African-American males in school settings. Threat (2007) suggested that many of the failures African-American males experience in the educational setting are due the failure of educators to understand the salient nature of race as a critical component in the identity formation process. Fordham (2010) postulated that racial identity is a critical process in the lives of adolescents that impairs their ability to navigate through the school environment. As emphasis is placed upon academic failure, the identity of the individuals that evolve in the midst of these failures are not considered. In examining failure, it is critical to identify factors within the school setting that shape these experiences leading to academic failure. An examination of these factors could provide critical suggestions to ensure more successful experiences for African-American males.

For decades, scholars have addressed the issue of educating students of color from a deficit model. The deficit model consists of viewing the mainstream dominant culture as the

normality and perceives minority groups as aberrations (Hibel, Farkas, & Morgan, 2010; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Given the fact that the deficit model does not value the culture of African Americans and views cultural attributes as aberrations, these cultural differences lead to Black males being referred and placed in special education at alarming rates as an educational practice (Kunjufu, 2005; Porter, 1997). In addition to minority students being perceived as aberrations, the deficit model also brings attention to the fact that minority students represent small numbers of the general population and the largest numbers of individuals identified as being disabled (Morrison & Epps, 2002).

The view of minority groups as aberrations in the school setting has resulted in increased representation in remedial academic tracks and special education classrooms. The tracks that lead into special education are packaged through an evaluation process that is culturally biased, with development of evaluation tools based on White, middle-class societal norms (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009; Vines & Hairston, 2005). As the White dominant culture develops evaluation tools, their language, culture, and experiences become the benchmark of success (Bonner, 2000). Bonner further asserted that standardized tests used to measure academic achievement and determine eligibility for gifted and special education programs measure cultural knowledge that African students have not acquired and are developed in a convergent versus divergent format. Therefore, utilization of standardized tests places African-American students at a disadvantage, leading to underrepresentation in gifted programs and overrepresentation in special education programs.

Many scholars believe that the educational practices evidenced in most public school settings are developed and sustained with the intention to ensure that African-American males are not successful academically. Ginwright (2006) postulated that many newly created policies

and practices that exist in the field of education and public policy have ushered in a public assault on Black youth and ethnic communities. The next section of this literature review will discuss cultural conflicts that exist for African-American males and will also include research that provides suggestions for improving the educational outcomes and experiences of Black males in the K-12 setting.

### **Common Cultural Conflicts**

#### **In Elementary School Settings for African-American Males**

African-American males exist in an educational setting that does not value their culture as an important component to consider in fostering their academic success (Kujunfu, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2003; Tatum, 2005). Evidence of the lack of importance placed upon highlighting the culture of African-American males can be easily accessible by reviewing any widely recognized textbook. Tatum (2005) argued that the current curriculum does not take into consideration that many students in urban settings come from socioeconomically, ethnically, and linguistically diverse backgrounds that do not share the language experiences represented in most texts. Ladson-Billings (2006) maintained that culturally relevant curriculum is a major factor, increasing the achievement of African-Americans by promoting a curriculum that promotes possibilities for students of color.

Although research has identified the absence of culture in most curricula as a factor attributing to the low academic performance of African-American males, most school districts lack the resources and support needed to enhance the educational experiences of African-American males. Townsend and Patton (2000) acknowledged the importance of resources in enhancing the lives of African-American students; however, they argued that resources exist within the realm of human resources that simply require individuals to willingly critique the

educational practices of themselves and others. Efforts to enhance the lives of African-American males cannot rest at the level of reflecting on one's educational practices without a systematic plan of action to address the deficiencies through incorporating financial and human resources.

Many scholars support the theory that cultural influences must be considered when developing educational strategies that promote positive experiences for African-American males in school settings (Banks & Banks, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005; Perry, Steele, & Hilliard, 2004). Tatum (2005) argued that the dominant curriculum is organized to convey concepts, paradigms, and experiences of the mainstream culture. Townsend and Patton (2000) contended that most traditional curriculum models fail to emphasize dignity, self-worth, and the importance of working with parents as a part of the educational experiences of African-American students. Hopkins (1997) postulated that rather than serving as a systematic structure to promote liberation, public schools foster social, political, and cultural inequalities.

Even in the midst of being educating in all-Black urban schools, Black males often remain culturally disconnected from the staff, who are typically predominately White and who expect them to engage in curriculum that does not address their cultural needs. Hooks (2003) posited that White culture marginalizes Black males by forcing them to suppress many aspects of their culture that are not well received by the dominant culture. Black students filter through the K-12 setting, often feeling disconnected from the curriculum with no further aspirations to pursue an education beyond high school (Banks & Banks, 2005; Ogbu, 1987; Tatum, 2005).

In order to engage students and raise the academic performance of African-American males, Tatum (2005) urged educators to move beyond the mandated curriculum and address the needs of African-American males, integrating the fields of education, sociology, anthropology, and social work. Based upon the belief systems of the dominant culture, the current curriculum

promotes competition and individualism. From a cultural perspective, African-American males must be exposed to a curriculum that promotes collective orientation, harmony with nature, and the importance of families and kinship (Vines & Hairston, 2005). Kirkland and Jackson (2009) examined how literacy formed and functioned in a group of adolescent males ages 11-14 from an educational and social perspective by allowing the students to incorporate attributes of their “cool” language into the academic setting without fear of consequences; cool talk was defined as their language syntax, semantic qualities, and musical phonology that operated like poetry. As a result of observing how the students acquired and sustained their ability to understand literary works, Kirkland and Jackson (2009) concluded that incorporating “coolness” allowed an outlet to cope with everyday stressors such as social oppression, racism, and rejection.

Scholars have provided theories that attempt to explain the experiences of African-American students in educational settings that have resulted in the dismal data conveying the academic achievement of African -Americans and ultimate enrollment in special education programs. Kafele (2009) argued that the cultural conditions associated with being a Black man in this country contribute to the lack of educational progress for African-American males. Kafele further urged educators to maintain an awareness of the impact of the cultural conditions endured by Black males through the following statement:

As we all know, Black males in the United States have been the victims of extreme racism for generations. Your Black male students are the products of this long and difficult journey. They are the ones who carry the scars. It is imperative that you consider the consequences of racism that your students must endure because it has a direct impact on their motivation to learn. (p.17)

Freeman (2006) contended that the absence of culture in the school setting is a determining factor leading to the academic underachievement of African-American students. Freeman suggested that the educational system has historically been used as one of the primary

channels that foster cultural alienation and annihilation of African-American students by discounting the cultural and social capital of Black populations. Freeman further argued:

Cultural alienation and annihilation have had a devastating effect on Black students' participation in education. Over time, the process of trying to breed "out" the Black (assimilation, whether through the devaluation of the cultural capital of Blacks or the what and who of the transmission of knowledge) has severely impacted Black students' sense of self "identity." (p. 216)

A synopsis of the theory presented by Freeman suggests that as Black students are culturally excluded from the educational setting through being placed on low academic tracks, they begin to internally exclude themselves as students. Kafele (2009) expanded upon Freeman's theory by suggesting that omissions, distortions, and marginalization of African-American culture has produced students who arrive at school daily with historical and cultural amnesia, which negatively impacts their academic achievement.

Conversations of the underachievement of African-American students portray a dismal state of affairs that is even more discouraging for Black males. Within the educational setting, Black males are valued the least; many Black males are educated in poorly staffed schools with limited resources and limited skills in addressing the needs of culturally diverse students, which subsequently ensures that they will never be able to compete academically with peers (*Report of the Task Force on the Education of Maryland African American Males*, 2007). As Black children are culturally disconnected, they become disinterested in school and perform poorly on most academic measures and assessments (Freeman, 2006).

Traditionally, from a cultural perspective, Black males are conditioned to be masculine, independent, and active (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Kujunfu, 2005; Majors & Billison, 1993; Ogbu, 1987). Within an elementary school setting, African-American males are typically punished for independent and adventurous behavior because it is often defined as being rebellious to



individuals in authority (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Kujunfu, 2005). Ferguson (2001) conducted a three-year field study analyzing the disciplinary practices for African-American males in an elementary school setting, concluding that confident outgoing males were misperceived to be defiant to authority and were often the target of increased consequences when compared to White and Latino males. Ferguson further maintained that labeling and disciplinary practices exist as part of a hidden curriculum that isolates Black males.

Research suggests that African-American males are expressive individuals who possess a natural level of movement and engagement in many ordinary tasks (Neal, McCray, Johnson, & Bridgest, 2003). Within an educational setting, these elements of movement and expression are often misinterpreted, leading to increased referrals and overrepresentation in special education. Neal et al. (2003) examined teachers' perceptions of African-American males' aggression and movement through observing and assessing the *stroll*, which was defined as a culturally expressive rhythmic walk. Findings from the study indicated that teachers are likely to mistake cultural differences for behavioral disabilities, contributing to African-American males being viewed from a deficit model, rather than culture being perceived as a positive attribute in school settings. Based on scholarly research with regard to the academic achievement of African-American students, one can ascertain that the concept of culture or the existence of culture conflicts in the educational setting, which defines and shapes the academic experiences of African-American males. Often, these experiences carry over into adulthood as a negative or positive reminder of what an education has to offer.

### **Secondary Educational Experiences for Black Males**

As Black males exit the elementary school setting, heading into high school, the challenge of navigating the educational setting becomes even greater. One of the many

challenges that African-American males encounter in high school is interacting within an educational setting that does not reflect their emerging values and beliefs. Wright and Tyler (2010) maintained that the cultural values of African-American, male, high school students are not acknowledged or supported within the context of the culture of the school. High school is a critical experience for all teenagers making the transition into adulthood (Mazotti et al., 2009). The establishment of quality relationships with teachers is essential in sustaining positive outcomes for African-American high school students as a prerequisite for academic success (Flowers et al., 2011).

For many students, high school is filled with challenges and rewards. In an effort to examine the experiences of African-American males in special education, one has to examine their high school experience from several aspects because a gap exists in the literature that explicitly speaks to this specific population of students. In order to effectively convey the experiences of this specific population, one must first implement a scaffolding approach that conveys the high school experiences of African-American students and disabled students respectively. By presenting the experiences of Black and disabled students, the similarities and differences will provide a better understanding of combined experiences of African-American males receiving special education services in a high school setting.

The purpose of conveying the experiences of non-disabled African-American high school students is to gain a better understanding of factors within a high school that potentially shape the experiences of African-American males receiving special education services; examining non-disabled peers provides a point of reference to identify similarities and differences in the experience. Efforts to accurately capture the experiences of all African-American high school students must incorporate research from high performing and low performing students to ensure

that the achievement of African-American students does not convey stereotypical undertones suggesting that all students are low performing. Scholarly research devotes limited attention to high achieving African-American students. Research focusing on student achievement highlights the accomplishment of gifted, middle-class, White students (Griffin & Allen, 2006).

African-American high school students are not exclusively educated in poor urban areas stricken by high rates of poverty. Existing within the small body of research depicting the achievement of African-American students, Griffin and Allen (2006) compared the experiences of high achieving African-American students placed at predominately White and predominately Black schools, respectively. Findings of the study concluded that African-American students placed in predominately White schools encounter hostile conditions that challenge them to rise above stereotypes about their ability to perform academically. Additional findings concluded that African-American students enrolled in predominately Black schools lacked access to the same resources, such as credentialed teachers, technology, and activities afforded to peers in more affluent school districts, but reported feelings of support and encouragement from teachers to pursue their goals. Issues related to overcoming stereotypes and negative perceptions are consistently present in the experiences of African-American students; therefore, African-American students must learn how to navigate through misperceptions and remain focused on their educational goals.

Griffin and Allen (2006) concluded that African-American students experienced more encouragement and success in predominately Black schools; however, some scholars would suggest that there are challenges that exist within predominately Black schools that impact the students' success. Butler (2003) argued that within the context of all-Black schools in poor urban areas, high school counselors feel ill-prepared to service African-American students and often

over identify them for vocational and trade school programs in lieu of accredited college programs. Within a high school setting, African-American students encounter an array of interactions with staff and peers that help shape their high school experience. It is critically important to study the experiences of African-American students because a gap in the literature is evident that highlights effective high school programs promoting experiences that lead to college readiness and transitions to college (Griffin & Allen, 2006).

Although many Black students meet with academic success in high school settings, some students continue to struggle academically and behaviorally. When compared to other racial groups, African-American high school students score lower in reading achievement (Flowers & Flowers, 2008). Flowers and Flowers (2008) further asserted that reading scores are affected by the quality and type of educational experiences; African-American students are often denied full access to higher order literacy experiences that result from the teacher's assessment and beliefs about their behavior and attitude. Given the depth of reading across core subjects in a high school setting, a student's success relies upon his or her ability to understand and apply the materials being presented.

Research describing the educational experiences of African-American males in high school primarily focuses on high referral rates for special education, statistics indicating high drop-out rates, disciplinary infractions, and academic failure, substantiating the fact that African-American males are in a state of crisis (Erksinne & Lewis, 2008; Kujunfu, 2005). Statistics regarding suspension and expulsion rates for African-American students indicate that out of the total number of students suspended nationally in a given school year, 57% are African-American males (National Center for Educational Statistics [NCES], 2011). In addition to the alarming rates of school suspensions, male students are reported nationally as being expelled from school

at a rate twice higher than females; African-American males demonstrate a percentage rate of 10% above the national statistics for rates of expulsion reported for male students across the country (NCES, 2011).

In addition to the negative experiences from the elementary setting and the current barriers that exist in schools today, Black males receiving special education services face even greater challenges than their non-disabled and non-minority high school peers. They must navigate through a new set of challenges requiring them to demonstrate traits of resilience to graduate in the midst of discouraging drop-out rates for students of color. Literature regarding the experiences of African-American disabled males in high school settings are often absent from scholarly research; however, a few scholars have contributed to this underrepresented field of study.

Murray and Naranjo (2008) contributed to this much needed body of research through their studies with poor, Black, learning-disabled students in urban areas. As identified within their studies, they have conveyed additional risk factors for learning-disabled Black youth. These risk factors include (a) high drop-out rates; (b) negative peer pressure; (c) neighborhood violence; and (d) early parenting. Experiences shared by participants in their studies were used to conclude that their low reading skills made the transition to high school difficult and created an atmosphere in which they had to hide their disability from non-disabled peers, creating a great deal of stress and shame. Within high school settings, students often solidify social groups and declare who is “in” and who is “out.” Disabled students learn to blend in and go along with the crowd to seek and gain acceptance; this is a characteristic that often proves to be detrimental when the students transition to college.

For students identified as having a behavior disorder, their high school experience of

being educated primarily in separate classes makes it difficult for them to solidify healthy relationships with peers (Porter, 1998). Porter further suggested that Black males are excluded from access to a rigorous curriculum because they are “lost” and warehoused in behavior-disorder classes. Without opportunities to access the rigor and social networks in the general education classrooms, it is difficult for Black males sustain educational success beyond high school.

Patterson (2005) added to the relatively small existing body of literature by suggesting that deficits exist in training teachers to implement effective instructional interventions for African-American males placed in special education. As a result of instructional deficits in developing and sustaining appropriate instructional strategies, African-American males are the recipients of educational practices that do not properly address their learning styles. In addition to exposure to improperly aligned instructional strategies, African-American males must also develop skills to shield themselves from low expectations placed upon them by teachers and staff. Patterson (2005) conveyed the issue of low expectations as a burden that African-American students must overcome to ensure that they do not become victims of a failure syndrome that fosters inaccurate beliefs about their self-knowledge and self-esteem. Thus, navigating through systems plagued by ineffective teaching strategies and low expectations fosters a climate of negative experiences for African-American males receiving special education services.

Within a high school setting, classroom teachers are not the only individuals who possess the opportunity to impact the educational experiences of African-American males. School counselors are in a position to assist in helping African-American students acquire academic skills and competencies (Flowers et al., 2011). Moore, Henfield, and Owens (2008) conducted a research study with African-American male special education students in a high school setting,

assessing experiences that led to their perception of the role of school counselors. Findings from their research further solidified historical and cultural factors that deter African-American males from acknowledging and receiving support from staff. The scholars argued that the historical effects of slavery and a combination of many present-day conditions of racism and stereotypes manifest themselves as distrust in the twenty-first century.

Gant and Grief (2009) argued that historical, ecological, and cultural factors have significantly impacted the current status of African-American males. Further support regarding the historical impact of slavery has been conveyed through research studies conducted by other scholars as well. Tatum (2005) ascertained that the current turmoil and difficulty with adjustments that African-American males experience today are deeply rooted in the history of slavery in America and can be evidenced by responses and behaviors of African-American males. Resulting from historical factors, African-American males are hesitant to trust and disclose issues that are impacting their lives.

Adding to the limited amount of scholarly research giving voice to the experiences of African-American males, Murray and Naranjo (2008) identified protective factors that led to African-American students with disabilities successfully completing high school with aspirations to pursue a college degree. The participants expressed that the presence of strong, caring special educators made a difference in their ability to succeed. In addition to the strong presence of special educators, family support and guidance from members of their community also contributed to their ability to make good decisions and remain focused upon obtaining their diploma. Murray and Naranjo (2008) further concluded protective factors make a difference in the success of African-American students in urban communities.

Absent from the literature are extensive studies that speak to the experiences of African-

American males in special education, conveying their voice, feelings, and ways in which they negotiate these feelings in a productive manner. The absence of “voice” describing factors that lead African-American males to overcome obstacles and successfully attend college limits opportunities to investigate protective factors that promote resiliency (Flowers et al., 2011). Bridges and Moore (2011) posited that any true efforts geared toward preparing African-American high school students for the rigor of college must consist of collaboration among teachers, school counselors, and developmental studies professionals to access a better understanding of issues that consistently interfere with educational outcomes.

The educational experiences of African-American males in this country have been plagued by many conflicts that have led to discouraging outcomes. Given historical trends of poor academic outcomes for Black males, one could ascertain that school systems have continuously failed to meet their needs. A growing debate among the educational community is that public school systems have systematically become a pipeline to prison systems for Black males. Though there are many factors that lead to the incarceration of Black males, the next portion of this literature review will focus on the role of special education as a supplier of the prison pipeline.

### **Role of Special Education in Supplying**

#### **The Prison Pipeline and Sustaining the Deficit Model**

As literature describes an educational crisis for African-American males, one must consider the roles schools play in fostering decades of negative experiences and promoting the acceptance of a disproportionate amount of African-American males being placed in special education at alarming rates. In the last several decades, public schools have become more segregated now than they were in the 1970s and 1980s; the new style of segregation is placing



Black males in special education and remedial classes for low academic achievers (Weatherspoon, 2006). As Black males experience poor educational outcomes, their ultimate enrollment in basic remedial classes and special education programs becomes more evident and unavoidable.

The issue of African-American children being placed in special education is viewed by some scholars as an ethical issue. Patton and Townsend (1999) contended that schools are rife with many issues that are intertwined with ethics, power, and privilege that impact the educational decisions and policies that affect African-American students. Patton and Townsend further argued that the historical maltreatment of African-American students by privileged groups of society solidifies the placement of African-American males in special education. In more recent literature regarding the dilemmas that exist in public school settings, Patterson (2005) suggested that schools have negatively impacted African-American students by providing inadequate services that have consistently produced poor educational and community outcomes. Patterson further suggested that schools also play a role in producing hostility towards adults by promoting controlling behavior as opposed to the delivery of appropriate instructional strategies.

Without effort, one can easily access volumes of research indicating that Black males are overrepresented in special education. Research conducted by Hibell and Farkas (2010) investigating identification and enrollment figures for students placed in special education determined that African-American children are 2.4 times more likely to be identified as mentally retarded and 1.3 times more likely to be identified as behavior disordered when compared to White peers. Statistical data from the study by Hibell and Farkas (2010) further concluded that although African Americans composed 20% of the population studied, they represented 45% of the students identified as having a disability; findings from this study provide a visual

representation of the deficit model. Additional studies investigating the referral and placement of African Americans in special education have suggested that that Black students are overrepresented in the areas of mental retardation and behavior disorders (Morrison & Epps, 2002; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011).

In addition to being overrepresented in the areas of mental retardation and emotional disabilities, Black students have been increasingly identified as learning disabled. Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) provide the following statement regarding identification rates for African-American students in the category of learning disabilities:

African American students are increasingly represented in the SLD category and are 1.5 times more likely than students in other racial/ethnic groups to be identified and certified under this category. (p. 270)

Given the increase in the rates of referral and identification of Black students in the area of learning disabilities, Patton (2005) suggests that this is a critical area of study in hopes of identifying of why students increasingly experience failure. Proctor, Graves, and Esch (2012) argue that efforts focused on why Black students experience failure and are overrepresented in the categories of behavior disorders, mental retardation, and learning disabilities must acknowledge the fact that these areas are subjective and represent judgmental and socially constructed disabilities.

Studies aimed at exploring the issue of minority overrepresentation in special education are not new topics of scholarly debate. Patton and Townsend (1999) postulated that the overrepresentation of African-American students in certain disabilities has plagued the field of special education since its inception. African American overrepresentation in mental retardation and behavior disorders and underrepresentation in gifted programs has been an acceptable educational practice for decades. Skirba, Poloni, Gallini, Simmons, and Azziz (2006) suggested

that special education and issues of disproportionality have been an intense focus of scholarly debate for the last 20 years. Trend data emerging from studies examining the issue of disproportionality among African-American students confirm that the problem is continuing to get worse (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009).

Sullivan and Artiles (2011) posited that previous studies examining the overrepresentation of Black males in special education failed to possess a theoretical framework, remaining focused too much on statistics and the placement versus the institutional processes that led to the placement. Sullivan and Artiles (2011) further argued that utilizing structural theory as a framework allows scholars to investigate policies that facilitate the disproportionality of Black males in special education. Structural theory provides a space for institutional racism to be considered as a factor in developing policies and procedures that fail to appropriately address the cultural and ethnic needs of students of color. An example of the implications of the structural theory can be found in the assessment tools generally approved at the state and federal level as accepted measures to assess a child as disabled; these measures are often created by the dominant culture and have been viewed by scholars as racially biased (O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006).

Research has documented that significant proportions of criminal offenders in the juvenile justice system have documented disabilities and are eligible for special education services (Morrison & Epps, 2002; Robinson & Rapport, 1999; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003). In an attempt to explore the theory that public schools serve as a pipeline to the prison system for Black males, Ferguson (2001) conducted a three-year study examining the educational practices that lead to identifying Black males as bad boys in need of special education or punitive forms of discipline school setting. As a result of the study, Ferguson concluded that Black males are

tracked for prison as early as elementary school through the implementation of practices that exclude them from general education settings by labeling them as “bad” or as “school deviants.” Ferguson further suggested the following opinion regarding the role of public schools in promoting and sustaining disproportionate incarceration rates for Black males:

There is also an immediate, ongoing connection between schools and jail. Schools mirror and reinforce the practices and ideological systems of other institutions in the society. The racial bias in the punishing systems of schools reflects the practices of the criminal justice system. Black youth are caught up in the net of the juvenile justice system at a rate of four times that of White youth. (p. 231)

Building upon existing opinions about the role of schools in sustaining a classroom to prison pipeline, Weatherspoon (2006) examined the racial injustices and inequalities that exist in this country for Black males and argued that public school systems warehouse Black males and prepare them for future placement in the penal system. Weatherspoon further argued that public schools directly supply prisons with Black males by disproportionately expelling and suspending them from school, excluding them from college prep curriculum tracks, segregating them in classes for low academic achievers, and ultimately impacting their desire to attend school and graduate from high school.

As African-American males are suspended from school, these suspensions begin to constitute discipline referrals that lead to placement in special education in behavior-disorder classrooms. Porter (1998) supported the theory that behavior disorder and in-school suspension rooms were developed to prepare African-American boys for prison life. Porter further postulated that the educational system has taken the position that it has no intention of educating Black males because education holds the power to free Black males from juvenile detention cells and jail cells.

Research suggests that correlations exist in data describing the overrepresentation of

Black males in special education and the prison system. In a study examining the demographics of a juvenile justice system, Morrison and Epps (2002) concluded that African-American males are overrepresented in juvenile correction systems. After carefully reviewing the racial composition of the juvenile correction facility, Morrison and Epps (2002) determined that Black males constituted 15% of the juvenile population; however, they represented 28% of juvenile arrests and 45% of delinquency cases. Statistics regarding the arrest rates support the theory that the deficit model exists in prison systems. The deficit model in prisons can be established when Blacks represent a small number in the general population and a large number of individuals identified for receiving the sentencing for more delinquent cases when compared to White peers or other negative area of society such as prison systems (Morrison & Epps, 2002). Identifying Black males as juvenile delinquents in need of the most severe sentencing possible verifies that their behaviors and actions are perceived to be abnormal and in need of the most rehabilitation.

With a deeper investigation into the academic histories of Black males as described in their study, Morrison and Epps (2002) further discovered that that a median age of 15 had been established; the majority of offenders at the median age were confirmed to be minority and poor, and were diagnosed with a learning disability or behavior disorder. Further findings from their research study provided a typical profile of the juvenile offenders that consisted of the youth demonstrating a below average IQ, problematic experiences in elementary and high school, and the inability to read materials they composed on their own utilizing their own vocabulary. In comparing the educational status of some Black males in prison systems and special education programs, similarities are noted in how they are perceived and the extent to which the perception determines the outcome. Black males are perceived to be aberrations in both systems and are serviced through institutional practices that result in more seclusion in the educational setting

and more punitive outcomes in the prison system. The concept of the deficit is prevalent in the educational system and prison system and continues to be an acceptable outcome for Black males.

The issue of the deficit model being prevalent for African-American males in the educational system and prison system has led scholars to postulate that being a Black males constitutes being at risk to be exposed to a double deficit. African–American males exist within a sociological framework that positions them to be viewed from a double deficit model. The “double deficit” model can be used to describe the conditions that exist for Black males in the general society and within the educational setting. As Black males in society, they encounter acts of racial discrimination, degradation, and racially driven policies fueled by society’s negative portrayal of their lives (Alexander, 2012; Howard, 2012). Palmer and Maramba (2011) posit that African-American males are more likely than any other racial and ethnic group to be marginalized and labeled problematic (p. 434). For Black males in this country, a penalty and plan for failure have historically been conceived at birth and continue to serve as a generational curse.

The negative portrayal of Black males through media coverage posits them as deviant members of society disproportionately in need of incarceration versus higher education. Petit and Western (2004) suggest that high incarceration rates have led researchers to declare prison a normal part of early adulthood for Black males. Research suggests that when comparing the number of Black men in the penal system to the number enrolled in college, the number in prisons exceeds the number enrolled in post-secondary institutions (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). In response to the disproportionate numbers of Black males represented in penal institutions across the country, Bennett (2013) provides the following argument regarding the historical

expansion of prisons in this county:

Historically, the expansion of imprisonment and its disproportionate use against minority groups, particularly Black men, could be characterized as the fourth manifestation of America's "peculiar" institution. The first was slavery, which was followed after abolition by apartheid-like segregation of the Jim Crow system. The third manifestation was the ghettoization of urban populations. The fourth manifestation is the development of mass imprisonment that has created a situation where poor Black men imprisonment is woven into the fabric . . . and life course . . . across generations. (p. 133)

For Black males, the school setting reflects the societal norms of the dominant White middle class culture (Serpell, Hayling, Stevenson, & Kern, 2009; Vines & Hairston, 2005). Given its endemic nature, race and the consequences of one's racial membership are engrained in the fabric of education in this country (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Race plays a critical role in the lives of Black males in its ability to serve as a predictor of success in the educational setting. Racial group identification has been posited to place African-Americans at risk for academic engagement through the influence of individuals' heightened awareness of the negative status of their racial group in society (Smalls, White, Chavous, & Sellers, 2007). The discrimination that exists in schools is a factor that prohibits African-American men from advancing through the educational pipeline (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Regarding the role of discrimination in fostering negative educational outcomes for Black males, Palmer and Maramba further provide the following opinion:

Teachers and counselors disproportionately track Black men into low academic-ability classrooms, whereas many of their White counterparts are placed in advanced courses that prepare them for college prep competitive institutions. Black men are overwhelmingly to be classified as mentally retarded and labeled to have learning disabilities. (p. 434)

As a result of many racially driven practices that exist within the school setting, a deficit

model of educating Black males has led to their overrepresentation in special education. Research suggests that the racially driven teacher perception serves as the basis for lowering expectations for Black students, resulting in limited levels of support in the classroom environment (Collins, 2011). In supporting the theory of the impact of teacher perceptions in fostering a deficit approach to teaching Black males, Milner (2007) suggests that deficit thoughts and beliefs may cause teachers to lower their expectations for Black males because of preconceived notions. As a Black male, the deficit model of teaching secures their enrollment in special education by promoting low achievement. Although Black males may desire to perform well academically, graduate from high school, and attend college, their placement in special education prohibits them from achieving their goals. In identifying the negative impact of Black males special being placed in a special education classroom consisting of rote activities filled with isolated skills, worksheets, and rote learning, Jordan (2005) provides the following argument:

The absence of this critical engagement in learning is referred to as literacy for “stupidification” or literacy for the development of only functional literates who meet the basic requirements of post-industrial society and keeps people in their place. (p.134)

Within this society, Black males exist within a web of stereotypes and racially driven practices that continue to secure them in a double deficit. Black males in urban school exist in poverty that equates to poor educational opportunities and a denial of a college preparatory curriculum, which contribute to a school-to-prison pipeline instead of a school-to-college pipeline (Winn & Behigadeh, 2011).

The literature describes an educational crisis for African-American males, and one must consider the role schools play in fostering decades of negative experiences. Patterson (2005)



suggested that schools have negatively impacted African-American students by providing inadequate services that have consistently produced poor educational and community outcomes. Patterson further suggested that schools also play a role in producing hostility towards adults by promoting controlling behavior as opposed to the delivery of appropriate instructional strategies, such as effective note-taking and guided-reading activities.

Throughout this literature review, research has documented that African-American males are in a state of crisis. Despite exposure to negative educational experiences fueled by institutional practices of marginalization, some young men defy obstacles and continue on to pursue a college degree. The final portion of this literature review will focus on factors that contribute to the overall educational success of Black males. In addition to attention being given to these protective factors, the literature review will also discuss their experiences in the college setting.

### **Family and Community Factors Inspiring African-American Males to Attend College**

African-American males encounter many obstacles in the educational setting that influence their educational goals and shape their decisions to pursue a college degree. In African-American homes, the family structure serves as an engine that promotes successful choices (Obiakor & Beachum, 2004). Herndon and Hirt (2004) further suggested that Black families establish standards in the home that affect the students' outlook on the larger social order and educational attainment. In a study identifying factors that led to success for Black students in pursuit of a college education, Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggested that families nurture and develop Black students' capacity to learn.

Adding to the existing literature surrounding family involvement, Flowers and Flowers

(2008) note that the reading achievement for African-American high school students is positively affected by parental expectations and involvement. Lessons in determination and resiliency that Black children learn to survive in society take place within the context of the family unit. Although research examining resiliency in African-American families has increased over the years, gaps still exist in this literature (Brown, 2008).

Black families play a critical role in fostering learning capacity and influencing decision making. However, most research conveying the role of the family focuses primarily on White families; absent are studies that convey the cultural significance of family life that examines intersections of race and ethnicity as it relates to the undergraduate experience (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Within the family unit of African-Americans, discussions of race and ethnicity cannot be omitted from any efforts to equip students with the academic and social skills needed to perform within the school setting and society at large. Issues of race and ethnicity are critical components of the Black experience that students must learn to understand and negotiate on the journey to adulthood.

Within the African-American community, family factors and influences extend beyond immediate family members and consist of many layers of support. Research has described these structures that exist as *fictive kinship* (Brown, 2008; Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Fictive kinships are networks of social support such as churches, neighbors, and members of the community encompassing cultural patterns that have historically contributed to the ability of African Americans to overcome adversity (Brown, 2008). Ogbu (2004) defined fictive kinship as one's sense of who one is and where one belongs.

Culture plays a critical role in establishing and maintaining fictive kinships. Fictive kinships promote feelings of pride and strength. Many Black students gain a sense of identity,

values, and attitudes from the neighborhoods in which they exist (Kafele, 2009). The fictive kinships in which students exist greatly impact their ability to perform academically and their desire to further their education beyond high school (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). As such, the African-American family structure plays a critical role in the student's transition to college.

### **College Experiences of Resilient African-American Males**

Throughout this literature review, research describing the dismal state of affairs for African-American males has been extensively articulated. Despite adversities that have historically existed in the lives of Black males, many young men have demonstrated resilience and successfully transitioned to college. This section of the literature review will focus on the concept of resiliency and the experiences of resilient African-American males on college campuses.

During the 1970s and 1980s the major focus of resiliency studies relied upon identifying variables that were found to be consistent in individuals displaying successful behaviors by utilizing instruments, data, and surveys to identify African-American students who had overcome obstacles and maintained a level of academic resiliency (Jones, 1995). Jones asserted that more contemporary studies have examined the impact of stress and protective factors that evolve in response to stressors, such as internal locus of control, intelligence, and positive life events.

More contemporary studies in the area of resiliency define academic resiliency as an educational achievement outcome that occurs despite the individual being exposed to statistical risk factors (Morales, 2008). Cunningham and Swanson (2010) identified the establishment of family relations as a factor that promotes resilience for adolescent African-American adolescents. Resiliency studies grounded in the experiences of young, Black males postulate that the issue of race cannot continue to manifest in a salient manner, minimizing its role in the

healthy development in the lives of these young men (Wright, 2011). Wright (2011) further proposed that high achieving Black students must possess a positive racial identity and links pro-Black identities to pro-academic attitudes. As young Black men experience adversities that have occupied a permanent space in the lives of generations of men before them, it is critically necessary for them to understand the importance of a positive racial identity in their efforts of self-preservation and self-empowerment that ultimately lead to their success. As a result of their ability to understand the importance of racial identity and its impact on academic success, these skills will enable young Black males to continue to demonstrate traits of resiliency, ultimately leading to continued success beyond college.

Despite their ability to demonstrate resiliency, many African-American males bring a number of the challenges of urban living with them to college, which greatly affects their ability to make decisions and sustain their enrollment in college (Roderick, 2003). Roderick suggested that Black males are often positioned as the father figure in female-dominated homes and struggle with leaving family members unprotected. African-American males exist in two different worlds, and community life is often different from the college campus life.

As African-American males matriculate to institutions of higher education, they must navigate through a system where educational problems that existed at the elementary and secondary level persist in their pursuit to obtain a college degree (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009). As they encounter these educational problems, it is imperative they continue to evolve as resilient young men. African-American males must work increasingly hard to show that they are not uneducable individuals seeking college degrees because of a stereotypic perceived athletic ability. Research studies conducted by Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) positioned stress as an everyday experience in the lives of African-American males on college campuses. Stressors that

define the everyday lived experiences of Black males on college campuses consist of navigating through systemic racially discriminatory practices, accessing adequate financial support, understanding the need to ask for assistance, and the disconnections that inevitably begin to surface regarding their home life (Palmer, Davis, & Hilton, 2009; Smith et al., 2007).

Although positioning themselves to emerge beyond the stereotypes that are congruent with life in an urban setting by attending college, African-American males are still subject to experiences and interactions that promote inferiority and doubt. The challenge of transitioning and maintaining one's status is increasingly difficult for African-American males with histories of receiving special education services in the areas of emotional disabilities and cognitive disabilities. In addition to sharing experiences of discrimination and alienation, disabled African-American males must navigate cultural stereotyping that often impedes their ability to seek out the academic and emotional structures of support that exist in institutions of higher education (Grant & Grief, 2009). The issue of navigating the cultural contexts that exist is complex with many intricate areas, requiring equitable levels of attention and research.

The transition from high school to college is difficult and filled with many barriers that require African-American males to demonstrate resilience in the midst of perceived defeat. The process is not limited to students receiving their diploma and traveling to their school of choice. The road to college is often "less traveled" for African-American males who have received special education services. Although the road is less traveled, scholarly research devoted to this area could produce greater outcomes for African-American males with histories of receiving special education services who have demonstrated a desire to pursue a college education.

### **Summary of the Literature**

The concept of transitioning students with disabilities from high school to institutions of

higher learning is very complex. Although statistics indicate that students with disabilities have been increasingly represented in college settings over the past two decades, the future for youth with disabilities remains dismal (Rice & Owens, 2004). The transition from high school to college is filled with a great deal of excitement and anxiety for students with disabilities. The protection of special education laws and federal regulations such as the Individuals with Disabilities Act no longer exist in institutions of higher education (Janiga & Costenbader, 2002). Disabled students must navigate many new structural systems at the collegiate level that are not required to accommodate their needs.

In addressing the complex needs of students with disabilities, a gap exists in the literature that speaks to the transition process for students of color. In the few studies that address transitioning students from culturally diverse backgrounds, Oesterrich and Knight (2008) conveyed that students of color have limited access to post-secondary education and are often placed in academic tracks that do not engage them in college preparation classes. In addressing the needs of Black males moving from high school to college, it is important to note that experiences that occurred in the elementary school settings informed their decisions to pursue an education beyond high school (Dancy & Brown, 2008). It is critical to further examine these experiences if true efforts are to be made to develop a body of literature that exists to promote more positive outcomes for students with previous histories of special education services who matriculate to institutions of higher learning.

Research conveying the experiences of African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education programs that transition to college is scarce. As reflected in the literature review, disabled students encounter barriers to educational access that could ultimately result in abandoning their goals to enroll in college and remain encouraged until the goal has

been completed (Hatzel et al., 2002). Disabled students are often misunderstood and feel victimized by stereotypes that suggest they are inferior, incapable of learning, and are seeking opportunities to do less than their peers (Denhart, 2008). As a result of the barriers and experiences with stereotypes, disabled students are often misunderstood, feel isolated, and experience the need to work harder than peers to demonstrate their intellectual potential and talents (May & Stone 2010). Although advancements have evolved through legislation that protects the rights of disabled students, efforts are still needed to ensure that their enrollment in educational settings is not tainted by feelings of despair and frustration. Data reflecting the enrollment of disabled students in higher education are dismal, indicating that disabled students only comprise 8.6% of the total enrollment of college students nationwide (NLTS2, 2011).

A close examination of literature conveying the experiences of disabled students that transition to college and disabled African-American males are similar in many aspects. Historically, Black males have been perceived as being intellectually inferior and unable to succeed in the academic setting (Bell, 2010; Jenkins, 1972; Tatum, 2005). The salient issue of race in school settings greatly impacts the academic outcomes of Black males, as White privilege establishes measures in which African-American males will be viewed and treated (Patton & Townsend, 1999). Stereotypes have led to African-American males being tracked into remedial academic programs and special education programs that do not have the rigorous standards that prepare them for college. Black males are also marginalized within the academic setting through exposure to teachers with low expectations. As a result of the negative stereotypes associated with academic achievement, African-American males are placed in a position to work harder than their peers to prove that they are capable competing in classes that require rigorous coursework (Mc Gee & Martin, 2011). As a result of experiences encountered in the educational

setting, Black males must demonstrate traits of resiliency in order to complete high school and ultimately pursue a college degree.

Statistics reflecting the enrollment of African-American males in college are even more discouraging. African-American males represent 5% of the total population of students enrolled in colleges nationwide. Though advancements have been made in the area of legislation that ensures African Americans have opportunities to receive an appropriate education in this country, there is still much work to be done to ensure better educational outcomes for African-American males.



### **CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY**

Black males are often disadvantaged by the perplexing and misunderstood intersection of race and gender [i.e., ritualized expressions of masculinity among African-American males can intersect negatively with boundaries of race in the context of school, which are often viewed as oppositional (Wright, 2011)]. For African-American males, the color of one's skin symbolizes centuries of racial injustices purely based upon one's membership in a particular race. Race has always been and will continue to be a factor that cannot be minimized or eliminated from any discussions regarding circumstances that impact academic achievement and social well being of African-American males in this country (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

In this study, I explore the transition process of resilient Black males with past histories of receiving special education services and a successful transition to a community college. Research suggests that the decision to attend college is the result of experiences that have taken place within the K-12 setting for African-American males (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Given the position of the research regarding college aspirations for Black males, I examined the educational experiences of these young men in the K-12 setting that have led to their aspirations to attend college despite exposure to risk factors that have led similar males to achieving less productive educational outcomes. In addition to examining their educational experiences, I also explored protective factors within their communities that have helped develop their journey toward pursuing higher education.

#### **Theoretical Framework: Critical Race Theory**

The theoretical framework utilized for this research inquiry was critical race theory (CRT). CRT was chosen because of its ability to examine the impact of race in this society;

specifically, CRT was chosen because of the historical role race plays in the education of students of color. The origins of CRT can be found through examining the efforts of lawyers, activists, and legal scholars who have pursued strategies to effectively address the emergence of post-civil rights racial structures and inequalities in the 1960s and 1970s (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009). Historically, issues of racism and inequality have been a part of the American experience for all individuals of color. As noted scholars establishing the foundation of CRT in the field of education, Ladson-Billings (1995) argued that society operates from a premise of being colorblind as an attempt to marginalize people of color.

The tenets of CRT are built upon efforts to challenge the intended neutrality in a colorblind society by counteracting meritocracy through empowering oppressed individuals by creating space for their voices to be heard (Abramo & Moio, 2009; Malagon et al., 2009). In order to understand the importance of CRT as a guiding theoretical framework in this study, it is critical to examine its key tenets:

1. *Endemic race*: Asserts that racism is an ordinary experience every day for people of color and is embedded into the social fabric of America.
2. *Race as a social construction*: Race is a contrived system of categorizing people according to observable traits with no biological or genetic reality.
3. *Differential racialization*: People in power can racialize groups of people at different times, in different ways.
4. *Interest convergence/materialist determinism*: Racism brings material and psychic advantage to the majority race, and progressive change regarding race occurs only when the interests of the powerful (i.e., the White majority) happen to converge with those of the racially oppressed.
5. *Voices of color*: The dominant group's accounting of history routinely excluded racial and other minority perspectives to justify and legitimize its power.
6. *Antiessentialism/intersectionality*: CRT acknowledges the intersectionality of various oppressions and suggests that a primary focus on race can eclipse

other forms of exclusion. (Abrams & Moio, 2009, p. 251)

As a theoretical framework, CRT provides a lens through which to examine these experiences. By engaging in this research study, it is my hope that the experiences described by the participants will serve as catalysts for transformational changes in the policies that shape the educational journeys of future African-American males with histories of enrollment in special education programs, who have aspirations of attending college

### **Methodology**

In addition to origins rooted in legal studies, CRT has also evolved as a vehicle to legitimize narratives and storytelling (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Given its ability to provide a framework for incorporating the elements of narratives and storytelling, CRT can serve a dual role as a theoretical framework and methodology in qualitative research studies. Through storytelling, CRT provides a medium for persons of color to provide their interpretation of how the law is used to justify racism. The final outcome challenges readers to experience thick descriptions that describe experiences of victimization through institutionalized practices of racism (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

In qualitative research that seeks to study the experiences of individuals of color, it is critical for the researcher to understand the tenets of CRT to ensure that the participants in the study are not exploited (Milner, 2007). Milner further postulated that researchers must not implore a color-blind research epistemology fostering the elimination of race as a factor because failure to acknowledge the salience of race and racism will result in the researcher failing to interrogate his or her beliefs. Failure to interrogate beliefs makes it difficult for the researcher to understand and be exposed to the participants' experiences.

Discussion of racism is often a very delicate matter in the field of research studies and

requires a great deal of effort to pursue it in a manner that fosters productive conversations with the goal of arriving at solutions to address the issues. As a researcher, I maintained a level of awareness about the sensitivity of this subject. I remained cognizant of the fact that though we may want to believe that democracy exists for people of color, subordination has been socially and legally sanctioned (Lopez, 2003). As I interacted with Black males, it was imperative for me to realize that they are not exempt from experiences of subordination and how this may affect their willingness to speak freely with me.

Despite difficulties that exist in addressing the issue of racism from a scholarly and practical perspective, issues of race must remain at the center of all research studies depicting the experiences of individuals of color (Milner, 2007). Race is such a part of our everyday experiences that Rogers and Mosely (2006), in a qualitative study, noted that White students as young as second grade were observed to act upon White privilege and engaged in conversations about race that minimized its impact. Most scholars and educators consider issues and conversations about race to be irrelevant; however, racism begins in the early stages of education and affects the mindset of students of color and of White privilege.

As this research study sought to convey the experiences of Black males, it was necessary to continually review the tenets of CRT both individually and collectively because they summarized the lived experiences of Black males in this country. By merely exploring the second tenet, an understanding is provided as to how one's skin color determines one's educational opportunities. Though all of the tenets outlined are equally important, as the study focused on the experiences of African-American males' educational experiences, it was necessary for me to maintain a clear focus on this tenet because it served as a guiding factor in the participants' educational experience. Stovall (2006) argued that Black students are negatively

labeled early in their school experience and are often unable to elude preconceived ideas about their educational development. Based on perceived notions, Black males are often exposed to educational practices that foster racism; CRT provides a lens through which to examine these experiences.

In addition to origins rooted in legal studies, CRT has also evolved as a vehicle to legitimize narratives and storytelling (Parker & Lynn, 2002). As a methodology, CRT greatly impacts the field of education through reshaping educational practices to address the cultural needs of diverse groups of students. Historically, school systems have operated from an oppressive, bank-like system in which teachers deposited information and students received it; this was the means of delivering instruction. Absent from instructional practices have been opportunities for students to engage in meaningful dialogue (Freire, 1998). As a methodological practice utilized in educational research, CRT can be used to promote involvement and engagement by incorporating the students' values, views, and perceptions (Stovall, 2006). By pursuing active engagement and creating a space for the students' voices to be heard, a story emerges that enables the reader to understand the students' interpretation of the events that have occurred within the education setting.

A critical component of this study rested upon accurately capturing the voices of marginalized participants through listening to their stories. A strength noted in the CRT framework is its ability to promote counter storytelling as a method to accurately capture the experiences of oppressed individuals by allowing them to tell their own stories, as opposed to accounts of their history being told by those granted the privilege to oppress others (Solorzano & Yosso, 2002). By engaging in this research study, the experiences described by the participants serve as a catalyst for transformational changes in the policies that shape the educational

journeys of future African-American males with histories of enrollment in special education programs who have aspirations of attending college.

## **Methods**

The purpose of this research study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black males who have defied the adversities of being placed in special education programs and have successfully transitioned to a community college. In order to best capture these experiences, I conducted three semi-structured interviews with four participants. The semi-structured interviews were guided by an open-ended interviewing protocol designed to encourage the young men to freely speak about their experiences (Jones, 1995).

The primary focus of the first interview was to build trust through sharing and exchanging background information. Trainor and Graue (2013) asserted that researchers must build trust as a critical component in the interviewing process by sharing information that displays a common interest among the researcher and the participants. In my efforts to build a level of trust with the participants, I shared information about my experiences as a special education teacher at an urban public high school that helped to shape my research interests. My sharing this information with the participants enabled them to view me as a person who has experience with some of the adversities they have encountered along their educational journey.

The second interview focused on their educational experiences within the K-12 setting, with a great deal of emphasis being placed on their high school experiences as an individual with a disability. Attention was given to their entire school experience because prior research documents that the experiences of African-American males in the K-12 setting shape their aspirations to attend college (Dancy & Brown, 2008). As a result of these interviews, I gained insight into circumstances they may or may not have encountered that are consistent with the

prior research on the educational experiences of African-American males.

The third interview focused on their fictive kinship and the role that has played in their successful transition to college. Fictive kinships play a significant role within the tapestry of the Black experience in America. As a result of conducting in-depth interviews, I gained an understanding of the role of fictive kinship within the lives of the young men who participated in the study.

### **Site and Sample Selection**

The setting of the research study was Roosevelt Moore College.<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt Moore College is located in a suburb in Illinois. The college has a population of over 17,000 students. In addition to college courses, students can earn a GED and receive services through their English as Second Language programs. Students with disabilities are serviced through the Center for Access and Accommodative Services Office. The site was established by sending a letter to the college asking permission to post flyers to recruit participants. Interested participants called or emailed me to express their level of interest.

Based upon the research provided that describes attributes of resilient individuals, criteria was established to ensure that a purposeful sample was selected, which included people who have experienced the phenomena being studied and who could serve an investigative purpose rather than a statistical representation of the population (Carter & Little, 2007). Participants in the study were African-American males ages 18-25, who were currently enrolled in college for one or more classes and who had past histories of enrollment in special education under the exceptionality of learning disabled, mental retardation, or behaviorally disordered prior to attending the college. Previous research has confirmed that African-American males are

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<sup>4</sup> Roosevelt Moore College is a pseudonym used to protect the identity of students and institution utilized in this study. Data source is from the institution's website.

disproportionately represented in these areas.

Exceptions were made to include young men who have been identified as having Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder and serviced under the exceptionality of *other health impaired*. Research suggests that African-American males are frequently misperceived as being hyperactive or aggressive and overrepresented in the population of students diagnosed as ADHD (Kunjufu, 2005; Porter, 1998). Students diagnosed as having ADHD are often qualified under the exceptionality of emotionally disordered or other health impaired; *other health impaired* refers to medical conditions that limit the student's ability to access the educational environment.

### **Descriptions of the Participants**

#### ***Junior.***

*The essence of everything spoken yet unspoken about Black Males. Uneducable, undesirable, underachieving, underrepresented, and unaccounted for. All terms used to define, demean, and discourage his path, his passions, and his progress. Erased are these uninvited terms and embraced are terms of strength and resilience unbroken, unstoppable, and unable to be influenced by those unlike him who do not share his dreams. (Dixon, 2013)*

Junior is a 22-year-old African-American male currently attending Roosevelt- Moore College. Junior is one of five children who resides with his mother in an urban area located near Roosevelt-Moore College. Junior's goals consist of becoming an engineer, owning his own engineering firm, and utilizing his firm as a vehicle to empower other Black males and men of color. Junior attributes his ability to overcome educational obstacles in his life to the support that has been extended to him from family, teachers, and selection of friends that motivate him to do his best. Junior is secure with who he is and doesn't let the perceptions of others deter him from his educational goals or persuade him to engage in self-destructive behaviors.

Junior's educational journey left me asking questions about the validity of tests and terms



that are used to diagnose and determine the fate of Black males. Junior represents a social question that has been discussed and debated and will be years to come: How does one become labeled as learning disabled in elementary school and placed in separate classrooms, but later achieve National Honor Society and collegiate level Dean's List status without the support of the same special education services that determined he was academically "deficient"? Junior's academic achievement and path for success can only be overshadowed by his journey to sustain life. Just as he has surpassed the symbolic "death sentence" intended for Black males based upon their racial membership, Junior refuses to accept the "death notice" in his daily fight with cancer by refusing to let this illness define his longevity.

Junior embodies the essence of everything spoken and unspoken about Black males. Spoken conversations about Black males center around their poor educational outcomes that lead to placement in special education. Silent are conversations about Black males who are making positive life decisions and who are attending college. Junior's placement in special education confirms stereotypes that African-American males are underachievers and unable to be educated. Unyielding in his educational pursuit of excellence, Junior remains unstoppable and uninfluenced by those who do not share his dreams and goals. Junior's positive outcomes and experiences remain unspoken in any conversations about Black males. Junior's voice will now be heard from the perspective of a young Black male bound and determined for success.

***Kylan.***

*Kylan, described by society and educational institutions as mildly mentally impaired, mentally retarded, intellectually delayed, learning disabled, and by society's definition, predestined to failure. Kylan—described by his inner drive and motivation as a college student, entrepreneur, community activist, and Executive Director of a not-for-profit youth organization—is future-focused on the possibilities that will be unleashed upon the completion of his college degree.*

(Dixon, 2013)

In the late 1990s, I served as one of four Special Education Supervisors in an elementary school district. It was during this time that I had the opportunity to meet Kylan. He was in the special education classroom for students in grades five and six, identified to have mild mental impairments. As two decades have passed, the changes in special education terminology for Kylan's classroom would identify him as being mentally retarded and cognitively impaired, the most recent terminology for 2013 being *intellectually disabled*. Given the task of managing the special education needs of the caseload at Kylan's school, I remember him very well. As a student, Kylan was a quiet, mild-mannered student who was always respectful and helpful toward any adult he met. One quality of his that stood out was his gentle spirit and his ability to exercise good judgment when other students broke classroom rules.

Academically, Kylan's class was designed for students who had IQ scores of 69 and below, with identified deficiencies in their daily living skills. Many of the students that graduated from 8th grade matriculated to high school and received their education in a functional life skills setting rather than an academically driven curriculum. After Kylan graduated from 8th grade, I had no contact with him. As my research study evolved, Kylan agreed to participate and I was impressed with the man Kylan had become. Dismissed was a timid, quiet young man with a soft voice, in my presence he was a poised, articulate, confident, college-educated young Black man standing six feet tall. He had defied multitudes of educational and societal stereotypes that predestined him to be uneducated and a threat to society.

Based upon the educational diagnosis of intellectual disability, Kylan was not expected to be an articulate man capable of great oratorical skills. During each interview, I became increasingly convinced that the elementary school special education team that characterized Kylan as intellectually delayed had grossly misdiagnosed him. How could someone identified as

being intellectually delayed possess such an intense vocabulary and ability to engage in an intellectually stimulating, scholarly conversation about the plight of African-American males?

As Kylan and I continued to engage in critical dialogue, my educational training reminded me that students with intellectual disabilities often have delays in their speech and language commensurate with their deficiencies of intellectual functioning. As I continued to formulate questions about Kylan's potential misdiagnosis, I could not help but wonder what happened to Kylan's predicted language delays: why had they not surfaced in any of the interviews? As I engaged in the process of coding my data for this research study, I continuously listened to Kylan's audio recordings. Contrary to the expectation that language delays exist for individuals deemed intellectually disabled, Kylan's audio recordings were clear, succinct, and absent of pauses that indicated he required time to gather his thoughts to formulate cohesive sentences.

Kylan is a 24-year-old African-American male currently attending Roosevelt Moore College. He is the youngest of five children raised in a single-parent, female-dominated home and currently resides by himself in a suburb in Illinois. After completing his associate's degree at Roosevelt Moore College, Kylan determined which four-year universities he would like to transfer to in order to obtain his bachelor's and master's degrees. Kylan plans to attend a small public university in Illinois for his bachelor's in justice in the fall of 2013. Upon completion of his bachelor's degree, Kylan would like to transfer to a large public university in Illinois with a longstanding history of scholarship and service in the area of strengthening communities of color through advocacy in the area of public administration. Kylan would like to obtain a master's in public administration. In terms of his career goals, Kylan would like to start his own consulting business in the area of communication, while also working in the nonprofit sector with his degree in public administration.

Like Junior, Kylan attributes his ability to overcome educational obstacles to the support extended to him from former teachers and members of the community who have served as mentors in his life. Unlike Junior, Kylan is a first-generation college student. Kylan is very secure with who he is and has not let the exposure to risk factors deter him from making healthy educational and life decisions. Kylan's passion to serve as an example for others has led him to develop a nonprofit organization for youth in his community. The origin of this organization began during Kylan's high school years. The concept began among friends as a community service project and has evolved into an organization for which Kylan serves as the executive director. In his role as executive director, Kylan has secured numerous grass-root grants that have enabled him to maintain an office suite in which to interact with youth on a weekly basis. In addition to the office suite, Kylan's grant awards have afforded him the opportunity to provide tutoring, mentoring, fine arts facilities, and daily meals for youth in his organization. Kylan's desire to positively impact the lives of children and families in the community has led him to participate in two elections for the position of village trustee in the town in which he resides. He participated in his first election immediately following his graduation from high school and just recently ran for trustee again in the April 2013 elections. Though Kylan did not obtain a position as trustee, he is still very committed to upholding his civic duty in contributing to helping others. He will continue to remain visible in local politics with the hopes of one day gaining a seat as an elected official.

In addition to civic work in his community, Kylan is very active with student government organizations and student activity committees at Roosevelt Moore College. Through the connections he has made at Roosevelt Moore, he has established a network of faculty mentors who assist him academically and also serve as resources for him in his endeavors as a grant writer and as the executive director of his youth organization. Kylan sees his level of

involvement at Roosevelt Moore as springboard for future work in public administration, while continuing to serve the community through grass-roots organizations.

Similar to Junior, Kylan's educational journey left me asking questions about the validity of tests and terms that are used to diagnose and determine the fate of Black males. As a student with a previous diagnosis of mild mental impairment and a current diagnosis of learning disability, Kylan's deficits warranted placement in separate special education classrooms for most of his K-12 experience. My interactions with Kylan showed him as very articulate, well-versed, confident, and able to balance the demands of intense civic involvement while successfully attending college.

Students with learning disabilities often have standardized tests scores that indicate deficiencies in tasks related to reading, writing, math, and verbal expression. In contrast to this expectation, Kylan's role as executive director of his youth organization requires him to read and write effectively to secure and maintain grants. Additionally, he must be able to prepare monthly expenditure reports verifying that grant funds have been properly administered. While his diagnosis predicted deficits in reading, writing, and verbal expression, Kylan somehow developed competencies in all these areas. His placement in separate education classrooms defined him as incompetent and incapable of academic achievement, so how did Kylan develop these competencies? One also wonders what Kylan's potential might have been in the K-12 setting if he had had the opportunity to be educated outside of separate special education classrooms.

Like Junior, Kylan represents everything spoken and unspoken about African-American males. Consistently articulated in the research about Black males are suggestions that African-American males are intellectually deficient, academic low-achievers and—more than any other race—educationally in need of placement in special education programs (Davis, Aronson, &

Salinas, 2006; Patton & Townsend, 1999; Weatherspoon, 2006). Absent from the literature are the voices of Black males who demonstrate competencies in their ability to positively contribute to the community. Also absent from the literature are stories of resilience that highlight Black males who have defied the odds and are successfully attending college. Consistent with Junior's perspective about the importance of sustaining positive peer relationships, Kylan surrounds himself with positive people who share his commitment to helping youth in his community and being civically active. Kylan's voice will now be heard from the perspective of a young Black male who has demonstrated he is determined to be successful.

***Bernard.***

*In the midst of the pressures that make having a baby out of wedlock something to celebrate, Bernard emerges with traditional family values that many believe do not exist. Bernard doesn't have it "twisted" he is bringing in old school when "family" meant being a part of a cohesive unit. (Dixon, 2013 )*

Bernard is an 18-year-old African-American male currently attending Roosevelt Moore College. In interacting with Bernard, I found he presents himself as very soft spoken and mild mannered. Bernard is the middle child of three. He currently resides with his parents in a suburb in Illinois. Bernard's parents are both military veterans, and his family structure includes a very tight bond with his grandparents, who reside close to his home. Bernard describes his parents as hard-working people. The importance of establishing a good work ethic has been passed down to Bernard. In addition to being a full-time student, Bernard has a part-time job that requires him to work the third shift. After working his scheduled hours that extend into the early morning hours, Bernard attends class.

Educationally, Bernard views Roosevelt Moore College as an opportunity for him to stay on top and never fail. Ultimately, Bernard envisions himself being employed as a certified

automotive mechanic. It is interesting to note that Bernard's father is also a mechanic and has spent a great deal of time sharing his love for cars with Bernard. A hobby that Bernard shares with his father is buying cars that need to be repaired and completing all of the work needed on them together. In addition to using the cars themselves, they also help family members with their transportation needs.

As a newly enrolled college student, Bernard's experiences turned out to be somewhat different from Junior's and Kylan's. Bernard has not had many of the same educational and social experiences as Junior and Kylan. Much of that can be attributed to their age difference and years in the college setting. In comparison to Junior and Kylan, Bernard appears to have lived a very sheltered lifestyle, a great deal of his socialization and lived experiences being obtained within the structure of his close family. Like Junior, the expectation to attend college has been evidenced by many members of his family. Bernard's mother has some college experience, as well as several of his aunts. Bernard's sister currently attends a college in Missouri. Unlike Junior and Kylan, Bernard did not provide a great deal of depth about school relationships established with peers or teachers throughout his educational experiences. But similar to Junior and Kylan, Bernard was diagnosed with a learning disability in the same elementary school district.

Together with Junior and Kylan, Bernard represents everything spoken and unspoken about Black males. A litany of research identifies Black males as delinquent, uneducable, and violent (Davis, 2005; Howard, 2012; Tapia, 2011; Wilkinson, Beaty, & Larry, 2009). Scant in the research are the experiences of young Black males who have graduated from high school and are in pursuit of a college degree. In addition to gaps that exist in reporting the experiences of these young men, a gap also exists in examining the role of their fathers in guiding them through

critical transitions in their lives. Existing literature on the role of the father in African-American families often positions them as members of the family whose absence contributes to negative outcomes for Black males (Reynolds, 2009; Thomas, Krampe & Newton, 2008). As an absent voice in the literature, Bernard's voice will now be heard as an African-American male college student raised in a traditional two-family middle class home.

***Jeremy.***

*Emerged from the pit of his own self-doubt, Jeremy dispelled all myths associated with brothers in the "hood" and is on a self-driven path for success. He has a well-defined self-image and no longer lets the perceptions of others define his destiny. Jeremy is well aware of who he is, the challenges he faces, and the potential he possesses. (Dixon, 2013)*

Jeremy is a 23-year-old African-American male student attending Roosevelt Moore College. Jeremy's decision to attend college rests upon his belief that earning a college degree is something no one could ever take away from you. Additionally, he feels that a college degree will provide him with a stable future. Jeremy is the youngest of six children and the first one in his family to attend college. He resides in an urban area of Illinois with his mother and brother. Jeremy lives in a part of Illinois that is plagued by a great deal of violent activity and gang recruitment. Jeremy limits his involvement outside of his home to his daily commute to school. With the exception of the public transportation that exists in his neighborhood, Jeremy does not interact with any of the elements associated with living in an extremely dangerous neighborhood. As a part-time job, Jeremy shines shoes at the local police station near his home. During the summer months, he secures full-time employment in various factories to ensure that he has money during the school year to travel back and forth to school and to purchase daily essential items.



Jeremy's educational journey is one that has become all too familiar for African-American males. Similar to the educational experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy was diagnosed with a learning disability in third grade. Jeremy conveyed that being placed in special education was embarrassing for him. The experience of being placed in a separate class away from his friends resulted in his viewing himself and as someone who was "slow." Embarrassed by how others perceived him, Jeremy masked his embarrassment by being disruptive in class. Jeremy felt more comfortable with his peers thinking he was in special education because of his tough behavior rather than his academic deficiencies.

Jeremy embodies everything spoken and unspoken about Black males. Spoken conversations about Black males focus on their poor educational outcomes and predestined encounters with gangs, violence, and death. Unspoken are the voices of young men like Jeremy who have overcome issues of self-doubt that have been perpetuated by inadequate, culturally mismatched educational experiences. Unspoken are the voices of young men like Jeremy who have not let the daily exposure of environmental risks that have claimed the lives of so many Black men deter his aspirations to obtain a college degree. Jeremy's ability to financially serve as major source of support with minimal financial resources from his home is absent from the literature describing how African-American males show resiliency in the ability to provide for themselves. Jeremy's voice will now be heard from the perspective of a young man who has overcome educational adversities and will obtain a college degree in May of 2013.

### **Participant Recruitment**

The recruitment process consisted of first sending letters of introduction to a counselor at the college. The letter provided a description of the research study, anticipated commitment of staff, participants involved, verification of IRB approval, and my contact information (see

Appendix A). Also, enclosed within the initial contact information sent to the site were flyers to be posted at the college to find interest among students currently enrolled who may meet the criteria of the study (see Appendix B).

Prior to conducting the initial interview, an individual meeting was held with each participant to review the consent and to gain their voluntary permission to participate in the study. During the individual meeting I introduced myself and provided a brief overview of the study, discussed the voluntary nature of participation, and assured them that their privacy and confidentiality would be protected. I concluded the meeting by reading over the consent forms, obtaining their signed consent, and thanking them for their upcoming participation (see Appendix C).

### **Interviewing process**

Semi-structured interviews were used during scheduled sessions with the participants. Semi-structured interviews utilize a protocol consisting of a prescribed number of open-ended questions that guide discussions (Pringle & Lyons, 2010). Questions may be developed using several methods that assist with encouraging the participants to have a point of reference in generating their responses. In a study examining the burden of acting White in an academic setting, Stinson (2011) provided Black male participants scholarly journals related to racial perspectives of educating Black males prior to interviews to assist with guiding the discussion; adoption of this method was utilized during my study and reflected in the second interview. The open-ended nature of semi-structured questions allows for the researcher to explore concepts as they may arrive.

As noted previously, participants in this study participated in three semi-structured interviews at Roosevelt Moore College in an area designated by the college. Interviews took

place at times mutually agreed upon by the researcher and participants. When conflicts with scheduling space became a concern, the local community library room was utilized. The three interviews took place within a month's time. An interviewing protocol was used to guide each interview (see Appendix D). Additional questions were added to help clarify existing answers given by the participants who were not clear during their initial response. Each meeting was audio-recorded and was sent to a certified transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews. Verification of the transcriptionist's credentials were provided with the IRB application and approved. After interviewing the participants, I coded the interviews to find themes that emerged as well as areas that needed to be clarified or developed further.

### **Data Analysis**

The process for analyzing data collected in this study consisted of utilizing an overlapping process of sorting and categorizing data through a procedure called initial coding and focused coding (Charmaz, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initial coding takes place at the beginning of the study and consists of breaking large amounts of data into smaller parts to help make sense of relevant interests, literature, perspectives, and commitment (Moghaddam, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). As I coded the data, I first identified general themes around CRT tenets and resilience. Second, I converted the data from general themes into specific concepts. The last step consisted of reviewing the emerging themes as they related to the existing literature that speaks to the experiences of the participants in the study. During this phase of the data analysis process, it was essential for me to review the tenets of CRT to help frame and gain a clearer understanding of the responses given during the interviews.

### **Ethical Considerations**

The issue of ethics plays a critical role in all areas of research to ensure that research participants are not exploited in any manner. Contained within this final section are ethical considerations that I considered in my study. Based upon a list of ethical considerations proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2011), careful consideration was be given to the areas of informed consent, confidentiality, and data access and ownership. In addition to ethical considerations proposed by Marshall and Rossman (2004), I utilized this section to address ethical issues that focus on the quality of the study as it relates to what Lincoln and Guba (1985) referred to as the trustworthiness of a research study; trustworthiness speaks to elements of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

### **Informed Consent**

During the informational meeting with the participants, the components of the consent were discussed. Participants were given opportunities to ask questions prior to providing their consent. Critical components of the consent were highlighted, including benefits and risks associated with the study and the fact that participation was based on the participant's willingness to participate and could be revoked at any time.

### **Confidentiality**

The names of the participants were not included in the audio-recorded interviews or transcripts. Each participant selected a pseudonym to protect his identity. I was the only person to have access to individual's name during the interviewing process. Each audio-recorded interview began with stating the individual's pseudonym and the time and date of the interview. I kept a master copy of a schedule of interview times and dates with the participant's name in a locked file cabinet in my office set up at my home. I reviewed the schedule periodically to ensure it accurately reflected the participant's levels of availability.

## **Data Access and Ownership**

Data collected in this study was stored in a securely locked file cabinet located in my home office. I am the only person to have access to this office via a door that remains locked when I am not working in the office.

## **Credibility**

In the field of research, we live in a quantitative world that assesses the effectiveness of a study upon proof of validity and reliability (Padget, 2009). Given the perception of effectiveness as a quantifiable measure, qualitative researchers are often the recipients of skepticism (Mansourian, 2008; Padget, 2009). Much of the criticism received in the field of qualitative research is based upon the perception that qualitative research methods are unsystematic or lack rigor (Leitz, Langer, & Furman, 2006). Based upon the misperceptions in the field of research regarding the scholarly merit of qualitative research, Lincoln (1995) was instrumental in conveying strategies to ensure rigor as an observable component of research studies. Many of the strategies proposed decades ago have been continually used by noted contemporary scholars. Building upon the earlier elements of rigor established by Lincoln (1995), Creswell (2007) suggested eight strategies to ensure rigor in qualitative studies. Creswell identified these strategies as prolonged engagement and persistent observation, triangulation, peer review or debriefing, negative case analysis, reflexivity, member-checking, thick description, and external audits. Though the list provided by Creswell to ensure rigor is lengthy, he suggested that the researcher utilize at least two of the recommended strategies.

Member checking is the most important component in the qualitative research study to ensure credibility (Shenton, 2004). During this process, participants had the opportunity to read the data transcripts prior to the final dissertation being completed. By providing the participants

with an opportunity to read their responses, an accurate presentation of their experiences was ensured (Percy & Benson, 2005). During the final scheduled interview, participants were informed that a follow-up session would be scheduled with them to review their transcripts prior to the publication of this research study. Participants were provided with a definition of member checking and were given the opportunity to ask questions. Credibility also is ensured through the background of the researcher and his or her familiarity with the phenomena being studied (Trainor & Graue, 2013). Given my background as a special education teacher in an inner-city high school and my current position as a Director of Special Education, I am aware of the challenges faced by the participants in this study in the academic setting and community.

### **Transferability**

The terms *transferability*, *dependability*, *credibility*, and *confirmability* are often used as alternatives to quantitative terms such as *validity* and *reliability* (Richards, 2007). Transferability refers to the ability of the researcher to apply the findings of the research study to other situations (Richards, 2007). In a qualitative study, it is often difficult to apply this definition to the findings because the findings are specific to a small number of participants who have experienced the phenomena being studied (Shenton, 2004). Qualitative studies employ transferability by providing transcripts from interviews that display thick descriptions from the perspective of the participants in the study (Mishana, 2004). Thick description provides a detailed account of experiences that occurred during the researcher's field experience and displays the ability to put cultural and social relationships into context (Mishana, 2004). The outcome of the interviews with the participants in my study will result in detailed descriptions of the participant's experiences. Transferability was accomplished through these thick descriptions.

## **Dependability**

Ensuring dependability in a qualitative study involves interrogating the context and methods used to derive data (Richards, 2009). Dependability is also obtained through assessing the quality of the process involved in data collection, data analysis, and theory generation (Abrams, 2010). During this process, I assessed if the research process was conducted while ensuring that critical attention was given to rules and methodological conventions (i.e., research questions are clear and connected to the research purpose, and parallels across data exist).

## **Confirmability**

Efforts to establish confirmability were maintained through developing an audit trail. An audit trail consists of, but is not limited to, journal notes and reflections that capture the data during the process of interviewing the participants (Gray, 2009, 2011; Shenton, 2004). I utilized a journal to record my thoughts about information shared that immediately related to research presented in my literature review. I also reflected upon ways to improve or engage participants more in the interviewing process when needed. Audit trails are an integral part of the research study because of their ability to demonstrate the process in which the interpretation emerged from the data opposed to being imposed on the data (Maxwell, Al Hano, & Skivington, 2007).

## **Conclusion**

The purpose of this qualitative study is to capture the experiences of African-American males with histories of receiving special education services who have successfully transitioned to college. By utilizing CRT as both a framework and methodology, I was able to accurately capture a rich description of these young men's experiences. When one examines the experiences of African-American males in the educational setting, I found race plays a significant role in guiding their educational experiences. Given its endemic presence in ordinary everyday experiences for

people of color, it is impossible to eliminate race from any discussions of the educational experiences of Black males (Abrams & Moio, 2009). Although all six tenets associated with CRT are equally important, a great deal of attention was given to tenets two and five. Tenet two refers to race as a social contract used to categorize people based on observation. Tenet five notes the importance of creating a space for voice in the lives of those racially oppressed. Utilizing CRT as a theoretical framework and methodology will allow me to use the powerful tool of narratives and storytelling to provide thick descriptions that convey a better understanding of the experiences of the participants (Abrams & Moio, 2009; Malagon et al., 2009).

Utilizing a purposeful sample of African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education programs who have transitioned to a community college allowed me to capture their experiences through semi-structured interviews, the research will add to a field of literature that virtually does not exist. Though research describing characteristics of resilient traits are prevalent among Black students, research that speaks directly to the experience of Black males in special education is scarce (Wright, 2011). Based upon the research that exists in the area of resilient students of color, academically resilient students are described as individuals who perform well academically despite exposure to adversity (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010; Jones, 1995).

Roosevelt Moore College was chosen as the site for this study because of the adverse circumstances that are situated within the community that surrounds the college. In addition to adverse community factors, the site was chosen for its reputation for providing services to students with disabilities. Based upon the reputation of Roosevelt Moore College's services for disabled students, the college served as appropriate site to conduct the research study.

The data analysis process served as a factor critical to my ability to successfully



accomplish the purpose of the study. Careful review of the data determined if the experiences of the participants confirmed or contradicted what the literature states about resilient students of color and factors that have contributed to their success, such as fictive kinships and positive relationships with teachers and family members (Cunningham & Swanson, 2010). In addition to the many tasks associated with conducting a research study, in order to ensure credibility, I had to maintain the confidentiality of the participants and continually examine ethical considerations, the guidance of which was critical to the study (Padget, 2009). Overall, the successful completion of the study rested upon my ability to understand and incorporate the importance of research that currently exists related to my research topic and literature that exists in the field.

## **CHAPTER 4: DATA ANALYSIS**

The purpose of this research study was to gain a better understanding of the experiences of Black males who have successfully transitioned to college despite the challenges associated with placement in special education programs and the societal constraints that exist as a result of their racial affiliation. In order to best capture these experiences, semi-structured interviews were conducted with four participants using qualitative analysis techniques, as described by Charmaz (2001) and Strauss and Corbin (1990).

### **Data Analysis Process**

The data analysis consisted of an overlapping process of sorting and categorizing data through creating initial codes followed by focused codes (Charmaz, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initial coding consisted of reviewing the transcribed data from each interview. After reviewing the data, initial codes were established that emerged from the data. Upon establishing the initial codes, I assembled tables to categorize the data from general codes into specific related concepts. By assembling tables, I was able to identify the frequency of responses as they related to each category. Finally, the themes were reviewed in light of the phenomenon under investigation, the specific tenets of CRT, and the key, common responses of the participants to form overarching themes that represented their voice through expressed experiences and perceptions of the participants as a group.

### **Findings**

Findings from the analysis of the study data revealed common relevant responses that represented elements essential to the experience and perceptions of the individual participants,

relevant to the research questions (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The coded responses were categorized into relevant thematic categories, highlighting initial themes from which to address the research questions for the group of participants as a whole. The analysis provides textual, verbatim data along with the response and frequency data to provide an in-depth understanding of the experiences and perceptions of interview participants as well as to capture directly the intimate voices of the participants. Findings are therefore discussed according to these categories.

### **Influence on Decision to Attend College**

The first thematic category was determined by responses related to the *influences on the decision to attend college*. Key factors included the involvement of immediate and extended family members and mentoring by teachers and other individuals in the school community. Family support was evident in the form of guidance, role models, and assistance with decisions about where to attend school. Table 1 (next page) illustrates the variety of the participant responses and the frequency of occurrence among the four participants, highlighting the key common responses.

Table 1

*Influences on the Decision to Attend College*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
<b>Family involvement</b>	4
Chose school because is close to home	3
Support from family contributes to success and decision to attend college	3
Family helped to make the decision where to go to college	2
Legacy	2
Positive and safe environment	2
Role models and guidance offered	1
<b>Mentoring by teachers and others in community</b>	2
<b>Always wanted to gain more and a broader knowledge base</b>	1
<b>To gain experience and tools to be successful in education</b>	1
<b>Importance of positive influences</b>	1
<b>Continue education for the career I want</b>	1
<b>Example of those in the community who don't have degree and limitations experienced</b>	1
<b>Like going to school so much</b>	1
<b>Self-determination and confidence in capabilities</b>	1

Family influences were stressed by all four participants. The following examples shed light on the impact of family involvement for the participants. The examples below expand upon on

several of the responses listed above, that describes the individual's, unique experiences and perceptions derived from these experiences.

One was the family support as far as at home. I noticed that you asked me a lot of questions about school and everything, but you didn't ask me about my family support at home or was there anyone who I looked up to that made me make these decisions of wanting to attend college, and I feel that there was someone in my household that influenced me, which was my brother-in-law. He took his time out and he sat me down and he talked to me daily about, you know, how important my education was and about the different decisions I make upon my everyday life. And by just sitting down and listening to him made me realize that I do have a decision to make and that there are people out there that are willing to help me with those decisions and by him sitting down and doing these type of things made me want to do more and not just be like my peers. He made me want to do more. And by having a disability it influenced me to want to do better, as well, because having a disability it made me feel, you know, a little beneath or lower than the average classmate or whoever I was going to school with. It made me feel beneath them, but having that family support base, you know, made me overcome that stumble or that fear within my life. . . . I would say my mother played a big part of me choosing Roosevelt Moore College because Roosevelt Moore wasn't my first decision amongst colleges of attending. She wanted me to be close to the family and able to get in contact with me to see me as much as she can, so I decided to choose Triton because it wasn't that far from home.

(Jeremy personal communication, December 18, 2012)

It was, first of all, it was close to home. My mother had actually gone there and she got a nursing degree there and she knew kind of how everything was. She knew the system, so to say. And she knew it was a pretty good environment, and I think that played a key role into going there because you don't want to send your kids somewhere where you have to wonder if they're going to make it home at night. . . . Because I know schools in the city, like out South, that like a couple of

my friends actually got robbed a few times because they was coming home late night. They had their book bag, their ear phones on, and somebody clipped them upside the head. You know you don't want your kids to go through that, so parents are actually worried about their getting in. I guess the environment was a key role to actually sending me to Roosevelt Moore College, and being that it's close to home. . . . also, the education. It's small enough in each class that you won't feel as if you're just a number, but big enough that you'll get the college experience as far as the campus. I know some colleges are just as big as universities, but they're not a university, but they have the landscape of one. So, you'd still get that feel of, okay, I'm on my own, even if it's for a few hours, you still have that sense of having to feel responsible. But at the same time, you know you still could go home and it's not that far and you feel safe, opposed to having to worry about if I put my earphones on today will I get robbed, stuck up for my shoes or my book bag or my laptop. Or do I not bring my laptop to school because I'm scared somebody is going to rob me and try to kill me for it. Education was a key and safety, a good environment. . . . It's a legacy luckily. My auntie, my grandmother, my mother, my stepfather, my older sister, a couple of my uncles, who else? I've got cousins, and I mean just from that you know I was looking at them like, "They did it. It's my turn." You know I didn't want to not be the one to be like, "Well, my uncle graduated from such-in-such IT with an electrical engineering degree, and I'd be at home doing nothing." My cousin graduated from Syracuse with electrical engineering and I'm doing nothing. You know my uncle lives in Ohio, he graduated with an architect degree and design, so I was like, okay, if they doing it, I'm not about to look like the, say, the fool of the family. And these are very smart people, it's my turn to show them what I can do too and to keep it going so that my kids can look at their great uncles and aunties and great grandma and grandma like it's okay to go to school. You know because you know with the pressure of how the world is, some people are looking at it like, "Nah, you ain't gotta go to school, school is not for everybody." But I mean, even saying that, school might not be for everybody, but taking up a trade may be,

going to a trade school to learn how to work with your hands, because if you go and do absolutely nothing, you're going to be left behind and it's not going to be a good feeling and you can't feed yourself, let alone if you have a family. So, definitely a legacy. (Junior personal communication, December 11, 2012)

My older sister went there and she went there to study for. . . to be a part of their childcare program they had during the time, and that was my connection because other than that I didn't know anything about the institution. But I knew that she had gone there to pursue her educational goals. She didn't complete, but, you know, that connection allowed me to connect to it, so I definitely think it makes it easier for you to make a selection if you know someone who has been through the system and has experienced how the system works as well, especially when it relates to helping you identify what the resources that the institution has as well.

(Kylan personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Teacher-student mentor relationships were another common response in terms of the positive influence on the decision to attend college. The following examples demonstrate the experiences and significant contribution of these teacher relationships.

Definitely, teachers from previous schools, some of my closest friends. I have a mentor, you know I talk to him quite a bit and we play basketball and we talk about school and we talk about how important education is now from back when he was growing up, how he maybe just needed a high school degree you can probably get a job. But now even those who just had a high school degree now have to look forward to going back to school because those companies are getting rid of them because they don't have that piece of paper, as they say, to show them that I know what I'm doing, I have this, and I went to school for this. You know so it was just kind of like, well, if you don't go to school, you're going to be looking for a job or you're going to be working for somewhere like McDonald's for the rest of your life and I don't think you want to be making \$8 for the rest of your life. You know that's not a way that you want to live. You want to live comfortable enough that you can feel, okay, if I want to go somewhere I can do

that without having to worry. So, with that in mind and looking at struggles of people that I actually know that didn't go to school and how they have to struggle day in and day out, I didn't want to live my life that way. Not to take anything from them, because they're great people, but without an education it's hard to get anywhere without knowing the right people. Sometimes you've got an education and not know the right people and not have a job, but that's a kind of shooting yourself in the foot because you might not know the right person that can hire you or get you into a good position. And then you're just stuck and you end up having to go to school anyway. So, do it rather sooner than later and don't regret it, going to school and bettering myself and stuff like that.

(Junior personal communication, December 11, 2012)

Well, I was a part of Toast Masters when I was in grammar school, and I continued when I was in high school, as well. I did a lot of activities after school while in high school so, you know, I would probably consider that as mentoring, you know, working with the teachers, having them to take me places that I have never been to before and giving me new experiences. So I think that played the part of mentoring, participating in those afterschool programs.

(Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

These teacher mentor relationships are further elaborated in the next section, in which the participants described their school experiences.

### **School Experiences**

The second thematic category revealed in the analysis was formed by clustering responses related to the participants' *elementary and secondary school experiences and how those experiences may have contributed to attending college*. Essential to this thematic category is the importance of building *positive relationships with teachers* (three of four participants). One participant noted that he was initially embarrassed about the special education label, hiding it from other students and feeling separated. With the help and guidance of a specific teacher, he



was able to understand the disability as a different way of learning and not something that should be a source of shame or embarrassment. Table 2 (next page) demonstrates the variety of responses and associated frequencies.

Table 2

*School Experiences and Perceptions of Special Education Students*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
Built positive relationships with teachers	3
Sought out volunteer opportunities, assisting and volunteering after school	1
Elementary experience was like a big family	1
Wanted to hide sped status at first from other students; initially felt separated	1
Teachers taught me to embrace my disability as a different way of learning, not a bad thing	1
Able to help others to feel good about self despite disability	1
Received assistance from sped office to conquer the challenges	1
Perceptions of those with sped services	
People wrongly look down on sped students because of the way they learn differently	1
Everyone learns at different rates	1
People should not judge others on how fast it takes them to learn something	1

The key common theme in this category highlighted the development of relationships, primarily with teachers. The following examples provide narratives of these experiences among the participants.

Well, I don't know this about me, but most of my math and science teachers, I

would reach out to them and tell them thank you. I met like my—I want to say my *sophomore* year. Well, actually, all four years in high school I had great math teachers, so I loved it. They always supported me and like if I came to them after hours or before class, they were always willing to work with me, so I greatly appreciated that. My science teacher was actually my track coach, too, so if I talked to him outside of class while we had a track meet, about something about physics, because that was the class, he would actually encourage me and tell me in real-life scenarios how to apply. And it helped me because I'm like, okay, this is what it applies to, instead of you teach me this formula or this and this and I'm like, what are you talking about? He actually broke it down into real-life scenarios, which I grasped a little bit easier than sometimes doing a formula you're throwing words at me. So my science mostly, my science and my, and I had one English teacher, and I really don't like English that much, but he was probably the greatest English teacher I have ever had. And not only from a teacher standpoint, but from a relationship, student-to-teacher relationship, like we had an actual, I think, a good relationship. And I would definitely tell him thank you because he was a great person. So that made teaching, for me to actually like his class, it made it easier because I knew him as a person. So that was good. And let's see, so my math teacher, science teacher, and my English teacher. And a couple of my coaches, I'll actually thank them, too, because even though they got on my nerves sometimes, the life lessons they taught me, you know, bigger than the actual basketball that I was learning at the time. It was a bigger picture that I didn't see at the time that I see now. And there's a work effort that I continue to put forth in everything I do, not only basketball, but everything I do in life. And just to not quit and to be a leader. You know you watch stuff, and then when it's time for you to step up you're always ready, so I would tell all of them thank you.

(Junior personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Throughout my educational experience in both elementary school and in high school I always built solid relationships with my teachers, to always helping out,

assisting, volunteering after school, because I think that it's, you know, it's just healthy to do so. But I've always had positive connections with those in the role of teacher.

(Kylan personal communication, December, 1, 2012)

Well, throughout my high school, throughout my high school, throughout going to high school, I experienced a relationship with my teachers and my peers. With my teachers I experienced getting the definition and understanding about being in special education. I felt that it was something that I wanted to hide from the other students throughout high school. It was something I didn't want nobody to know and when I heard of being in special ed or LD slow classes, I felt bad about it, but having different conversations with my teachers influenced me that it's just a name and it's okay to have a disability, or to be in special ed because it helps you with things that you are facing in your day-to-day life and it took me a while to understand that it was okay and that the help was there. I mean, as far as with students, they said bad things to make me feel different, but like I said about sitting down with my teachers and them telling me that it was okay, I had to experience myself knowing that I was in special-education classes and that I was learning through a different way.

(Jeremy personal communication, December 18, 2012)

Personal perceptions of being labeled with a disability and their own experience confirm existing stereotypes and misperceptions that exist for special education students. Special education students are often looked down upon and considered to be incapable of achieving at high levels academically; however, the reality is that they only learn differently from others and should not be judged according to how or how quickly they learn. This was passionately expressed by Junior, who stated,

I think people need to know that people from, say special ed or whatever, that they are actually, you know people don't look at them as always the smartest people or always the coolest people, but you know we are human just like

anybody else. We have friends, we have families. And I think people wrongly look down on those people just because of the way they learn or a certain disability that they might have, opposed to looking at them as, what if this was my brother or my sister or my cousin? You know everybody is faced with different challenges, so I believe that this will help enlighten people to understanding that they are the same no matter how they learn or what they might look like. And personally going through it and knowing how certain people tend to look at people that is not of, say, mental capacity of somebody else, they look at them like, you know, badly. Opposed to looking at them like, okay, he might not be the fastest when it comes to doing the math problem, but he can draw out the world or he can make music. We still are humans, but we just, the way of our thinking is a little different or it's not as fast processed as others. But pretty much to say that we're human and everybody don't have the same mental capacity, so everybody learns at a different rate. But learning, they don't put a standard on when you should learn something or how fast you should. So I think people should not judge people on how fast it takes them to learn something or how slow.

(Junior personal communication, November 30, 2012)

### **IEP, the Transition Process, and Initial College Experiences**

The third thematic category is related to school experiences; more specifically, highlighting *the transition process from high school to college, experiences of IEP meetings and transition meetings, and initial college experiences and services received*. The responses to this inquiry were varied. One specified challenge in this transition period was noted by one participant, who discussed the challenge of not knowing the resources available in college or how to access them. In contrast, the IEP and transition meetings described by participants served to meet just their immediate high school needs, such as identifying their strengths and weaknesses, keeping them on track with credits and helping them to identify specific challenges upon entering college. Consistently communicated by the participants was the fact that the IEP meetings also

encouraged them to continue to work hard, while directing the student to possible resources, giving the student an idea of what to expect in college, and supporting the student's confidence. Absent from the transition process were concrete visible efforts to ensure college and/or vocational resources were in place upon their exit from high school. In terms of the resources and special services made available to the students in college, the TRiO program at this college was noted by two participants. Other participants noted the use of tutoring services and the receipt of extra time for assignments and testing.

Table 3

## IEP and HS Transition to College

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
<b>IEP and HS transition meetings</b>	
Helped identify what need to focus on and possible challenges upon entering college	2
Encouraged me to continue to work hard	2
Focus of IEP meetings was to identify areas of strength and weaknesses	1
Directed me to possible resources	1
Gave me an idea of what to expect in college	1
Helped track grades	1
Gave me confidence through teacher feedback that I could do it.	1
<b>Transition process and initial college experiences</b>	
Challenge of the transition from HS to college; not knowing resources and ways to connect	1
Support from family and friends makes it less scary, not that bad	1
Pride in working hard for something and achieving that knowledge	1
Transition process was difficult	1
<b>Services offered in college</b>	
TRiO program: Helps to track academic progress and tutoring	2
Tutor: for more one-on-one attention	1
Went to department of disabilities for assistance; received extra time	1
None	1

Study participants focused on the benefits of the IEP and transitional meetings in terms of

helping to identify their needs and possible resources in college. The following examples give the details offered by each participant.

Well, I think that they helped me a lot because if they keep, they helped me to keep track of my grades, to see where I'm at, and see where I stand, or what, where I needed help on at that time, because like one of the subjects I was kind of down the drain with and I needed to focus on that; then, when my next IEP meeting came up they shot up to a eight. Mmm, what else? That's all I can think of. (Bernard personal communication, December 8, 2012)

Kylan described identifying strengths and weaknesses, and the possible challenges that might be faced in the college setting.

Well, do you want the IEP meetings, what it. . . you know, the fabric of the meeting was basically to identify areas you were strong in and areas you were not so strong in. And the meeting kind of helped me to really kind of see those areas I was not so strong in and the areas I was strong in as well. So areas I needed to improve in as well. And it kind of helped me with relation to Triton and what I need to focus on and what my challenges were going to be entering the Triton system. . . . So it just really being able to identify what the strong points and weak points and directing me to possible resources as well, giving me insight on possible resources I can tap into there as well. So, really, like a guide to where you're at and kind of like what you need to do to get to the next level.

(Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Other participants also highlighted the encouragement they received to continue to work hard:

Well, my experience throughout that process, I can remember in my IEP meetings of the different compliments that I was getting from my teachers, the feedback that they were saying that I'm such as a go-getter, I want to do. And by hearing those things and getting it steady pounded in my head I felt that after high school my transition to Triton is that. . . I mean that Jeremy is this guy that, he's this guy that he can do it. You know, he's a go-getter, he asks, he's opening up more. He's

asking questions. He's getting involved in more things. And by hearing those things and doing those things I felt myself being able to do so. And just by hearing those words of accomplishments and those uplifting words, it played a very huge impact in, in my school here at Triton. I believe that having those meetings helped me out a lot because of the positive talk that they were saying and, you know, bragging about that I was an accomplishment throughout my high school years. They gave me the confidence of wanting to do more and wanting to help others do more. (Jeremy personal communication, December 18, 2012)

Well most of the discussion was to continue the good work because they seen how I progressed as a student throughout the four years I was in high school. And they'd seen how more encouraged I was and better I was when it came to academic studies. So they encouraged me to continue that and to always work as hard as I did, and to pretty much take the bull, how do they say it, bull by the horn? Instead of procrastinating things, I was like more, let's do it, let's do it now. And get an understanding instead of being hesitant and procrastinating about their stuff. So the last couple of meetings were just pretty much them supporting me and telling me to continue with the good work and to don't be discouraged. Because you know many people fail classes, but you ultimately fail once you stop. So I was like, don't quit, just continue on and work as hard as possible because you know once you give your best effort, nobody can take that away from you. So it was moral support and continue to strive for the better in myself...I would say the most helpful was being able to reach out I guess, to say to be able to communicate with people that have been to college and kind of pick their mind on how a college experience would be and what to expect, and how to approach classes, and how to not just be in a box so to say. . . . But it definitely prepared me from a standpoint of knowing what could happen and not going in there with a blank mind like, "Oh, is this going to happen or is this going to happen?" Instead of guessing, I kind of had a couple, a couple—I can't think of the word—I guess, like I said, I had an idea on how things were going to work . (Junior personal communication, December 4, 2012)



## Attributes Critical to Success

The participants offered their insight into the factors that are perceived to be *contributing factors to student success* in terms of the ability to attend college. These responses served to form the fourth thematic category of perceived critical attributes to successful transition to college. Common themes included self-motivation and ability and desire to self-educate (3 of 4 participants), guidance and support from parents and family (3 of 4 participants), desire and drive for personal success (2 of 4), and surrounding yourself with “the right people” in terms of positive role models and influences by peers. Table 4 offers a variety of responses with associated frequencies of occurrence among the four participants.

Table 4

### *Attributes Critical to Success*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
Be self-motivated; self-educate	3
Parents and family that point you to your goals; importance of influence of family	3
Have drive and desire to succeed	2
Surround yourself with right people; striving for goals and education	2
Have to be future focused at all times	1
Seek resources available to you	1
Importance of education K-12	1
Consistent; not giving up	1
Confidence; self-esteem; able to be self	1
Feeling a part of something	1

Common themes consisted of being self-motivated and self-educated, having the drive to

succeed, remaining focused on the future, and demonstrating confidence, despite having a learning disability. These concepts were expressed in detail by Junior, who explained:

Another question would be, what is your motive, what is your motivation to actually keep going? Like, what is making you want to strive to be better? Like, you know what have you seen that made it click in your mind, like, I can't live this way and I don't want to live this way? You know I don't want to be looked at like this; I want to make an example; I want to make a difference. I want to, you know, I don't want to follow trends, I want to set them. . . . I want to be great. I want to, like, when I leave this earth I want to be known for something beyond just being a nice guy. I want to be known for he was a nice guy, but he was smart. He was intelligent beyond belief. He was able to talk to people, and they wouldn't know that he might have had a learning disability when he was younger because he actually worked that hard to better himself, that you wouldn't know the difference between him and the next person. I want to be able to, you know, when I'm gone they say, "He impacted my life." I want to impact people's life in a positive way. And not only Black young men, but everyone. I want them to look at me and say, "That's who I want to strive to be." And when I get older, no matter what the situation is you've been faced with, no matter how many times you've been knocked down, the only time you truly fell is when you quit. You know you can get pushed down on the floor, but if you keep getting back up you're not losing. You know you're still getting better every time. And just to, I mean, it's a lot. I want to write a book so you know I want to inspire the world. I mean that's my whole. . . . I just, I think I want to just help other people with my life so that they can look at it and be like, "You know what, he came from this, he was faced with this, and yet he still grows from it all." Like you wouldn't have known that I was sick or you wouldn't have know that, technically, I wasn't supposed to graduate from college or I wasn't supposed to be an author one day. You wouldn't know that, or you wouldn't have thought that it would happen because of the statistics of what people or the environment or people may say that

people with certain disabilities might have, like me. They probably are not going to make it out of their grade. They're going to be somewhere cooped up in a halfway house or in jail or in trouble all the time. I don't want that to be said, I want them like, "Wow, he had this." You know they read my book and say, "Wow, he was faced with this?" And they'd be astounded. So, I want to make people say, "Wow!"

(Junior personal communication, December 11, 2012)

Kylan focused on the needs to be self-motivated and a self-educator and the desire to be a success:

Well, if I could just encourage students who are behind me, I just would encourage them by telling them to be self-educators, education is important. It allows you to negotiate while you're at the table. It allows people to take you serious on matters that they didn't take you serious on before. And always, always read, because reading gives you, not only does it give you knowledge, but it also gives you information and information is very, very important in today's society. And people will be able to elevate you based on that information that you have. So the more you know, the more you'll be able to grow and the farther you'll be able to go, as well. So it's important to just. . . being able to just read, and gain as much knowledge and wisdom as possible; and listen to folks who have been through the process already because it limits your liabilities, going through the process of listening. Also being able to follow instructions when people give them to you as well. The more you are able to do that, the less liabilities you have and the more successful you will be because of those things. . . . I would just probably add that you have to want success for yourself and you have to be future focused at all times. No matter what challenges that the individual may face, you have to seek those resources that are available to you to achieve whatever goals you have, and you have to be future focused at all times. And the other thing is having the drive to win, because that's what it's simply about. It's about the individual choosing to win, in spite of the odds being against you, you have to choose for

yourself that you want to live a better life; you want to provide something better for yourself, for your family, and for those who are around you. And we have to start thinking about, well, how can I leave my mark, right? And what can I do to bring my brick to this bridge so that others may be able to cross over it as well. So it just simply, you know students being self educators. You know if you don't get it in the schools, you have to go out and seek it yourself because that's life. All the time we may not get the information from one particular person. We have to do our own research and examination, so to say, so that we could make better choices ourselves and not go off of information that's just being given to us, but be self educators. And that is very, very, very important. And even with the things that happen in the Chicago Public School System, that was my message as the teachers and the union and the city and the administration and state were going against each other. My motivation is why you guys are out of school, don't get on Facebook, but pick a book, a real book, and read so that you could become a self educator. Because at the bottom, at the end of the day that's really how you get ahead. Because it's up to you and that's how you do well in college because they're not going to hold your hand when you get there. They're not going to be calling home telling your parents to help you with your homework or that you didn't do your homework. It's all going to be on you, and that's why I think for so long we have been, folks have been holding our hand, but when it's time for them to let go, we kind of reject that and we don't do so well, simply because of that whole process. But eventually it's going to have to stop, and I think that we need to at earlier stages, start getting our students into having them being self educators, picking up a book, doing extra, going beyond what the teacher gives you so that you could be able to compete in this competitive society when it relates to the educational piece or jobs or just being able to compete in life in general. So self educators, I think, is very important. And just being self motivators, not waiting on others to say, "You're doing a good job," or "Keep up the good work," because that may not come. And you need to know that if you want to continue, that you need to have that within yourself and you need to

choose to win, choose to win.

(Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Junior also expressed the importance of hard work on perseverance despite adversity:

You know, I look at me and my brother, for instance, he's in college, I'm in college, and you're like, well I only had my mom, or I lived in the worse neighborhood. Well, I only had my mom and I mean my neighborhood wasn't the Beverly Hills or anything, but you know me and my brother worked together with our mom and we both... I mean, we're not successful yet, but we're always working for that. You know being able to go to college, some people look at that as like it's like a dream. And being that me and my brother have and are in college, you know it's like it's not only a dream, but it's something that can be reached if you try hard enough. (Junior personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Participants also discussed the importance of parents and family influence. For example, participant Bernard stated,

The more you learn, the only thing you can be successful is from your parents because they'll point you to that goal in life on what you're trying to become or trying to be, trying to accomplish that and keep on doing what you want you want to do and have a life.

### **Educational and Career Goals**

The fifth thematic category was developed from participant responses related to their *personal career and educational goals*. Essential to this thematic category was the shared belief that this first degree would serve as a stepping stone for continuing educational pursuits (three of four participants). The career goals of the participants varied, but they highlighted the desire for success in starting their own businesses or generally contributing to the working society by being a leader or by inspiring and empowering other young Black men to do the same. Table 5 presents the responses under this thematic category and the frequency of these responses.

Table 5

*Educational and Career Goals*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
<b>Career goals</b>	
Start my own business or firm	2
Senior engineer status	1
Empower other young Black men to do the same	1
Work in nonprofit sector	1
Automotive technician	1
Can use degree to further career	1
<b>Educational goals</b>	
Will continue education beyond this degree; will use to further my education	3
Degree is something no one can take away from me	1

Participants in this study exhibited strong career and educational goals. The following examples provide a glimpse of these goals and expectations for the future:

Well, with the degree that I will receive from Roosevelt Moore College, I know it's a degree that no one can take from me, and I can use it to further my education and further my career, and to help others. And working with my hands and knowing about cars is something that I take dearly to my heart so, getting a degree in with working with automotives will really help me in my career.

(Jeremy personal communication, December 16, 2012)

Well, I plan on being one day a senior engineer at a firm. And after that I plan on actually owning my own firm for not only Black engineers, but a very diverse workplace. But I want to, so to say, empower the minds of young Black men that they can pretty much do anything no matter what some may look at them as or

how they might be perceived as. But you know, try to broaden their horizon as mine was opened up as I started my journey at college and seeing different things, met different people. So pretty much owning my own business instead of working for other people, but at the same time giving back to people of not only my race but others. (Junior personal communication, November 30, 2012)

Well, I am currently studying at Roosevelt Moore College in general studies; I'm getting a degree in general studies. And my goal is to transfer over to North University to gain a degree, a bachelor's degree in justice, while I hope to take that degree to City University, and get a degree in public administration. And then after that I hope to springboard to start my own consulting business, a communications firm, while also working in the nonprofit sector with that degree in public administration. (Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Educational goal is trying to stay on top and never fail; and career plans is to stay career plans. . . Pretty much. . . I pretty much see myself as an automotive technician. (Bernard)

### **Cultural Conditions and Misperceptions for African-American Males**

The sixth thematic category, *cultural conditions and misperceptions for African-American males* was formed from both participant perceptions related to current literature depicting the dismal state of affairs for African-American males and their own perceptions of issues surrounding higher education for Black males. Common responses included the need to defy stereotypes and generational scars (3 of 4 participants), a multitude of issues that must be addressed to support African-American achievement (2 of 4 participants), and the need to support and develop resilience in African-American students to promote perseverance (2 of 4 participants). A comprehensive compilation of responses is provided in Table 6 (next page) along with the associated frequencies.

Table 6

*Issues and Misperceptions of African-American Men*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
Breaking down stereotypes and generational scars	3
Many issues that must be addressed in order to see positive results in AA achievement	2
Need to support and develop resilience in AA students to these issues so that they persevere	2
Need to focus on K-8 to get them future focused and more driven	1
Need to empower AA male	1
Fighting racism and misperceptions of AAs in higher education	1
Lack of two-parent home or family	1
Not every young Black male has the same problems	1
School experiences, friends, community experiences that at shape contribute to positive self-concepts and developments	1
If apply self to best of ability will succeed, despite racism or other things	1
Can chose role models who have succeeded, then aren't trying to be White, just emulating success	1

Participants in this study described the need to break down negative and debilitating stereotypes that contribute to the struggles of Black males. This concept was perhaps best described in detail and at length by Kylan:

When people are introduced to an African-American young man, you know they have all of these thoughts running through their heads that they are creating based on their experience with others. So you know you're tearing down that. But also



you know it's just generational barriers that must be broken. You know we are now making some major strides, some relates to different things in our world with our President Barack Obama now, you know you're looking at a lot of young African Americans saying it is possible, I too can be president. We just kind of really got there, but we really are still not there. So when it relates to, like, employment things, we have to kind of empower our young people to, you know when they step out, to step out ready and prepared because there are a lot of stereotypes that are out there that must be torn down. There are a lot of negative thoughts and perceptions that are out there about African-American men. All of them are not standing on the corner, but you have those who are graduating with masters and PhDs. And you have some of my friends that I know that I have kind of associated myself with, they have showed me that it is possible, so we have to put those individuals on the frontlines to continue to show young men in African-American communities and in schools and universities that it is possible. You know when things get rough, you know if your friend was able to do it, well, if this guy was able to do it, I too can do it. And that's why I continue to surround myself around positive African-American male influences. . . . A lot of barriers need to be broken, generational curses and chains that need to be broken, but it's within us to be great because there's greatness in our history. . . . So, we need to really kind of evaluate that system. And I know it is relevant in our school system. It is definitely relevant in our school system, and I have watched so many students, and not only their peers, but family members just kind of ridicule them just because they can't articulate their words properly. So we have to start embracing that and praising it as well. When we see young people living up to their fullest potential and utilizing their talents to move along and to get ahead in our society. And that's really what I think the country is built on. I think that everyone has a talent and it's simply about utilizing that talent to get to the place you want to be. And it's not something that's complex. It's just about identifying a talent and assisting students and challenging them to live up to their full potential. So I definitely think that this is true, and I had a conversation with

someone who I work with about what does that mean, acting White? And it was the same thing the statement just said. You know we have to really identify and help our students identify what does acting White mean? Does acting intelligent mean to acting White? And I'd definitely say no, it's just simply acting intelligent and having the skills or talents that are needed to get to the next level. Because that's what people look for, they look for intelligent people, whether you are African American or White. They want someone who can speak well and someone who could communicate their message in a way that people can understand it. (Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Kylan continued to convey the multitude of issues facing the Black youth and that the solutions start at home and include teachers and educators in the community, commenting on the it-takes-a-village mentality:

But I think that there are many marks or many scrapes that must be addressed when it relates to African-American students because they're coming in with so many different problems so it's really hard for you to focus on your academics if you are struggling with housing issues and you don't have a place to live. And it's really hard to focus on academics when you can barely get back and forth to school. Or when you are thinking about what you're going to eat when you get home because there may not be any food in the refrigerator. So there are a lot of issues that must be addressed in order for us to really start seeing some positive results in relation to African-American students achieving their goals. . . . And staying involved in the process and not giving up and dropping out simply because something has happened at home or something has occurred that is messing up their atmosphere, their thinking atmosphere. But we need to kind of build up a strong resistance within them. And it starts with, it starts at home, but if they're not, if they don't get it at home we need to kind of go back to that it-takes-a-village mindset and mentality to make sure that if you see that they're not getting it at home, have other components in place. Like teachers stepping up if the teachers are identifying that the parents are not participating in the process, the

teacher provide other outlets to encourage their student to live up to his or her full potential. So there is a lot of work that needs to be done to address the issue. And I think. . . I don't think it will be something that will happen overnight, but I think that we need to start making the correct steps in that right direction to address the problem, and we'll start seeing some positive results.

(Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Junior added similarly,

Well, I only had my mom and I mean my neighborhood wasn't the Beverly Hills or anything, but you know me and my brother worked together with our mom and we both. . . . I mean, we're not successful yet, but we're always working for that. You know being able to go to college, some people look at that as like it's like a dream. And being that me and my brother have and are in college, you know it's like it's not only a dream, but it's something that can be reached if you try hard enough. No matter where you come from, I look at it as if the person wants to do it, they're going to do it. Like you look at TV and you say, "Well, this guy is selling drugs." Well, look at the guy that's not selling drugs. That's the same age that's doing what he should be doing instead of downplaying that all Black guys end up in jail or sell drugs or have babies. And you know it's not true. I mean there's a time and place for everything; you plan on having a kid, but when it's planned, instead of having it when you're 16. So, that is definitely a negative vibe you would get when you look at those types of things, magazines, the TV, the news, it's always negative when it is young Black males that are doing the right thing. And they're not, unless they get glorified, but they're not getting put out there as much as the negative people are.

(Junior personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Bernard described the need for increased awareness:

You have to be aware of what's being said or what's being told to the young, Black males because you can't believe anything that other people will be saying about them. . . because they just got to be, they just got to be aware because if you

don't be aware you're going to wind up not doing the things that you really wanted to do. When you exceed through high. . . exceed through elementary school, high school and college, you would just be coming out of high school and not go to college and just sit around being. . . get in trouble, fights, jail, or probably wind up being dead.

(Bernard personal communication, December 8, 2012)

### **Feedback and Recommendations for Teachers and Counselors**

The participants in this study were asked to provide their feedback and recommendations to the high school teachers and counselors who assisted them in their transition to college. The responses were varied, but the participants offered their gratitude for the encouragement and support extended to them by their teachers and counselors. In addition to their gratitude, the following recommendations were also made.

Table 7

#### *Recommendations and Feedback to Teachers and Counselors*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
Encourage to go beyond teaching, and ensure they equip students with resources and tools	1
Invest in promising students, make sure working up to potential	1
Make sure students know it is going to be challenging, but to stick to it, be future focused	1
Encourage students to aspire to be great	1
Let them know they can do it, can go to college	1

Kylan mentioned the recommendations to encourage mentorship and go beyond classroom teaching while also specifically investing in those students with promise and

supporting them, but also being realistic with them by letting them know it is going to be challenging and not to give up.

It was difficult, challenging, and almost thought to be impossible, with starting the process. And I would definitely encourage them to just go beyond making sure that they equip students with the correct resources and tools to make the transition to appear easy. Because it would have been very easy to just give up, but me being the fighter that I am, I continue to move forward on my faith to do what seemed to be impossible at the time. So, I would definitely strongly encourage them to give students the resources, go beyond just teaching them the curriculum, but also make sure that you are connecting with them, too. . . . And if you see talent in someone, invest in them and make sure that their students are living up to their fullest potential. . . . And I know that they have a lot of students that they may deal with, but just making sure students know that it is possible that it's going to be, you know it may be challenging, but to stick with it and to always encourage the students to remain future focused, because that's how I was able to make it. (Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Jeremy also highlighted the need to encourage students, in terms of letting them know they can do it, specifically those with learning disabilities.

I would say that it could be done and that I'm a living testament of it being done because everyone has that little person inside of them telling them what they cannot do. You know, and if a lot of students, even myself, have that small voice inside of me telling me what I cannot do because I have a disability. And what I felt what others might say. But what I would like to let them know is that they should tell their students that it's able to be done. It can be accomplished because Jeremy, he was the student that you guys are and that, and that I'm here; that Jeremy, he's moving forward with his life. He's in college and just because you're in special ed or you have a disability, it doesn't stop here as far as high school; you can also go to college and receive a degree and have a career.

(Jeremy personal communication, December 18, 2012).

Further, Kylan described experiences from the perspective of the special education student and the need to encourage these students to aspire to greatness, despite the challenge:

And I had a lot of students, I mean a lot of teachers at the school as well to kind of speak over me as well. So, teachers need to continue to speak over students, even when they're not at their best, continue to let them know that they could aspire to be something great and better. . . . Let them know that they want to do great things and that they're going to achieve great levels of achievement. And just speak over in whatever they see. So they may see you as doing something really powerful in the future, so a lot of those teachers say, "I know the kid will go and do great things, or I know that you are going to be a powerful young person in the community." And just being able to speak words basically of encouragement over the student. (Kylan personal communication, December 1, 2012)

### **Participation in the Present Study**

Finally, the participants were asked what influenced their decision to participate in this present study. The responses offer insight into their desire to have their voices be heard and to support positive change among these students. Although varied, each response reflects social responsibility in terms of capturing an accurate representation of Black males by highlighting their perspectives and academic successes. Table 8 provides the different responses given by participants and the associated frequencies.

Table 8

*What Influenced Decision to Participate in the Study*

<b>Response</b>	<b># of participants offering this response</b>
Providing the Black male student perspective of college	2
Offer my point of view	1
Explaining my success may help others through similar problems	1
People avoid asking for help because of disability or being made fun of, but can be cheating self of an education	1

Participants expressed their influence in choosing to participate in the study, which reflected their social concerns and the ability to offer their perspective to assist others. Kylan stated simply, “I feel like it’s a great way to communicate as successfully as possible from a student perspective.” Similarly, Bernard noted, “I’m trying to—trying to get my point of view on what I see when I attend two different schools and that’s pretty much it. Just to get my point of view on the things I see.” Jeremy provided great detail in his answer, giving clues into the rationale behind providing one’s perspective or point of view:

Well, what influenced me to participate in this is that I know I’m not the only student that has problems and stumbles throughout college and I won’t be the only one. And there are other students that have these problems and by me explaining my success and the help that I am getting, I believe that it’s able to help another student in their situation that they’re going through in college. And I believe that every college student should be able to have someone to go to for help. And I believe I’m the person that, again, that can help them with the information that I’m providing to you all. . . . Well, I mean, I had a lot of influences. One, being that I felt if I was able to speak on my behalf personally from, how do I say, how I feel different Black men probably don’t get to speak when you know. . . I don’t know how to say this? There’s a lot. . . Pretty much

just being heard. The knowing the ups and downs of going through college, I mean people don't always get a male. . . that is, Black perspective because they don't look at us as going to college in the first place. So once I attended college and had learned and experienced different things, I think other people should know that at first it's scary, but it's not being able to talk about it and get my perspective on if you go in with support from family and friends, I mean it's not as bad as it seems, as most probably make it seem like it is. But it's not that bad. I mean it's hard work, but it's not. . . I mean if everything was given to you, you wouldn't appreciate it. So being able to work hard for something and then, say, getting an A in a calculus class or chemistry class, you feel like, yes, I'm one step closer to what I want to achieve in life and nobody can ever take that information that you do gain away from you. . . . I believe that students shy away from wanting to ask help for, you know, with certain things that they're dealing with within their classes, you know, because of maybe a disability or maybe they feel that they'd be made fun of. And I feel that by letting those things get the best of you, you are cheating yourself out of a degree and your education because there are people out there to help you overcome these stumbles that you are facing, and you don't just want that to go by. And the help is there, so I feel that if there's anything that's bothering you or that you need help with, try to reach out and ask someone for help, because help is there.

(Jeremy personal communication, December 16, 2012)

## **Conclusions**

The conclusions were developed from combining information gained through the review of individual narratives and the key common responses within the thematic categories of the previous section. The data from the thematic categories were clustered and re-organized into the following overarching themes, which offer insight into the conclusions for the group as a whole. Thus, the overarching themes below describe how the participants as a group perceived the



essence of their experiences. The themes and corresponding experiences provide the overall conclusions of the data analysis.

### **Theme 1: Defying Racial Stereotypes and Generational Scars**

Desire to defy stereotypes and generational scars that have sustained negative issues that promote educational and societal constraints for Black males. The multitude of constraints and challenges that exist for Black males must be addressed from a multilayered approach, which must be addressed to develop resilience and promote positive outcomes for Black males.

### **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Family support and influence contributes to student success and the decision to attend college and which college to attend through providing positive role models, guidance, and a safe and positive environment.

### **Theme 3: Teacher Relationships and Student Success**

Relationships established with teachers greatly affect student's desire to attend college. Maintaining positive relationships ensures students have access to resources and have developed positive attitudes about the benefits of hard work and perseverance.

Positive relationships and mentoring relationships with teachers as well as other members of the school community encourage achievement and ultimately support college attendance. The importance of learning that having a disability status is not something to hide or be embarrassed about, but rather is a personal characteristic that reflects your learning style and not your intelligence. This concept, along with the support and encouragement of family and the school community, supported these participants to demonstrate educational and career goals of higher education, leadership, and entrepreneurial achievement.

#### **Theme 4: High School Transitional Meetings**

Transition from high school to college was aided by IEP and transition meetings, which served to help identify possible challenges upon entering college and encourage the student to continue to work hard, while identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses and directing the student to possible resources, such as tutoring services and programs such as the Trio program.

#### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

Attributes critical to success included self-motivation and ability and desire to self-educate, the drive and desire to succeed, and the ability to surround oneself with positive people who support striving for goals and the value of education.

#### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

Educational goals consisted of pursuing their education beyond the community college. Career goals consisted of exploring entrepreneurship and empowering other Black males to pursue their educational goals.

#### **Theme 7: Voices from the Black Male Perspective**

The desire to have their voices heard from the perspective a Black male perspective.

## **CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION**

### **Critical Race Theory**

This study utilized critical race theory (CRT) as a theoretical framework to understand the experiences of African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education who successfully attend community college. Increasingly, CRT has become utilized as a conceptual lens to identify the intersectionality of race, gender, and racism that shapes the experiences of Black students in the K-12 elementary system (Caton, 2012). Caton further articulates that when used as a framework, CRT confirms ways in which racism is embedded in the school system contributing to unequal educational experiences for Black males.

In addition to utilizing CRT as a theoretical lens, this study also incorporated CRT as its methodology through storytelling and narratives. As a methodology, CRT allows scholars the opportunity to challenge the premise that the United States has transformed to a color-blind society by capturing the experiences of Black males who have been exposed to racism and racial microaggressions that have become intertwined in the fabric of the educational system (Caton, 2012). The primary goal of exploring these experiences was captured by using the storytelling component of CRT. By utilizing CRT, the young men were able to have their voices heard, while conveying their experiences from the perspective of individuals who have experienced cultural conditions associated with being a marginalized member of society (Abrams & Moi, 2009; Malagon, 2009).

## **Themes**

Through engaging in rich dialogue with the participants from the study, seven themes emerged that captured the depth of the experiences the young men shared. The next portion of this discussion will provide descriptions of the themes that emerged with the participants.

### **Theme 1: Defying Racial Stereotypes and Generational Scars**

There is a desire to defy stereotypes and generational scars that have sustained negative issues that promote educational and societal constraints for Black Males. The multitude of constraints and challenges that exist for Black males must be addressed from a multilayered approach, which must be addressed to develop resilience and promote positive outcomes for Black males.

### **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Family support and influence contributes to student success and the decision to attend college and which college to attend through providing role models, guidance, and a safe and positive environment.

### **Theme 3: Teacher Relationships and Student Success**

Positive relationships and mentorship relationships with teachers, as well as other members of the school community, encouraged achievement and ultimately supported college attendance. It was important to learn that having a disability status is not something to hide or be embarrassed about, but rather is a personal characteristic that reflects your learning style and not your intelligence. This concept, along with the support and encouragement of family and the school community, enabled these participants to demonstrate education and career goals of higher education, leadership, and entrepreneurial achievement. Maintaining positive

relationships ensures students have access to resources and have developed positive attitudes about the benefits of hard work and perseverance.

#### **Theme 4: Transition from High School to College**

The transition from high school to college was aided by IEP and transition meetings, which served to help identify possible challenges upon entering college and encouraged the student to continue to work hard, while identifying areas of strengths and weaknesses. Transition meetings also directed students to possible resources, such as tutoring services, and programs, such as the TRIO program.

#### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

Attributes critical success included self-motivation and ability and desire to self-educate, drive and desire to succeed, and the ability to surround oneself with positive people who supported striving for goals and the value of education.

#### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

Educational goals consisted of pursuing their education beyond the community college. Career goals consisted of exploring entrée and empowering other Black males to pursue their educational goals.

#### **Theme 7: Voices from a Black Male's Perspective**

The desire to have their voices heard from the perspective of a Black male. Literature on Black males portrays them as problematic individuals who are unable to productively contribute to society. Absent from the literature are stories of resilient Black males who make positive live choices and achieve positive educational outcomes. Given the absence of the perspective of Black males in the literature, this study will capture their unheard voices. In an effort to best

capture the depth of the experiences, each participant will be presented as a mini-chapter. Presenting each participant in this manner will allow me to fully describe their experiences as they relate to each theme that emerged in this study.

## **Junior**

### **Theme 1: Defying Stereotypes and Generational Scars**

Discussions regarding the plight of African-American males in this country center upon a negative portrayal of their existence. African-American males exist within a web of stereotypes fueled by racist beliefs that consist of being perceived as problematic, uneducable, easily prone to violence, intellectually inferior, absent in raising their children, endangered, at risk, and content with the unemployment rates that depict them as individuals refusing to seek employment (Alexander, 2012; Erskinne & Lewis, 2008; Gibbs, 1988; James, 2012; McGee & Martin, 2011). Junior's enrollment in a community college with transcripts that indicate he is able to compete academically with White counterparts does not exempt him from the stereotypes that attempt to define him purely based upon his racial membership. Simply by the observable shades of his rich brown skin, Junior inherits the historical burden of proving that he is not intellectually inferior and that his physical presence does not present a threat to anyone (Howard, 2013; Jones, 1972; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). Despite his academic achievements and initiations into honor societies that acknowledge his academic excellence, Junior cannot alter the fact that race is a social construct that will continue to categorize him based upon racist beliefs that lack biological or genetic evidence to validate them (Abramo & Moio, 2009; Malagon et al., 2009).

The stereotypes that exist about African-American males are not applied exclusively to "young brothers" who live in the "hood"; the multitude of these beliefs impact Black males from

all facets of life. The endemic nature of racism cannot be separated from one's daily life experience (Soloranzo, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). Sue et al. (2007) define these daily experiences with racism as microaggressions. Sue et al. further define microaggressions as brief, everyday, commonplace verbal, behavioral, or environmental indignities that perpetuate hostile, derogatory racial acts and insults toward people of color. Microaggressions maintain a space in our daily experiences through exchanges of conversations in passing, direct conversations, and body gestures such as facial expressions and movements in response to discomfort caused by the presence of individuals of color. In their efforts to perpetuate America as a color-blind society absent of overt racist actions, subtle acts of racism have replaced cross burnings, lynchings, and physical attacks; although easily disguised, microaggressions continue to fuel the toxic effects of racism by providing it with a modern day makeover.

As an African-American male existing in a web of racially driven stereotypes, it is critically necessary to explore the impact of these stereotypes from a scholarly perspective. The exploration of these stereotypes will provide a deeper understanding of the context in which Junior is defined as a result of his race, as well as the constraints Junior must navigate what the researchers have called the *stereotype threat* (Davis & Aronson, 2006).

When asked to comment on the impact of stereotypes that have become ingrained in the fabric of our society, Junior shared some experiences that give credence to the fact that racism is alive and well. In Junior's opinion, most things that are portrayed for young Black men or Black men in general are always negative. Beyond the constraints of the portrayals that exist, Junior does not believe that all the negativity being displayed is the truth; however, he does acknowledge that Black males who are doing the right thing aren't glorified as much as those engaging in negative activities.

Junior's beliefs about the lack of exposure highlighting the activities of positive Black

males are documented by scholars who share the same concern. Noguera (2008) asserts that research depicting stories of resilience and positive outcomes for Black males in the educational setting is limited. In lieu of stories of resilience and positive outcomes, African-American males are consistently placed in headlines for being the initiators or victims of alarming rates of violence and murder (Alexander, 2010; Ginwright, 2006; Giroux, 2005). Grounded in the tenets of CRT, some scholars would argue that negative portrayals of African-American males exist for the intended purpose of ensuring that the dominant culture continues to acquire financial benefits (Abramo & Moio; Malgon et al., 2009; Howard, 2013). Howard (2013) postulates that America has a love-hate relationship with Black males; America loves the financial revenue generated by rap artists glorifying negative aspects of the 'hood, but reveals its hatred for young men pursuing an education by attempting to shackle them through facilitating stereotypes to portray them as by uneducable, undesirable, and invoking fear in others.

As a student pursuing a degree in a field that requires rigorous mathematics and science courses, Junior has experienced acts of racism in the form of microaggressions and overt acts of racism at his community college setting. Junior shared acts of racism and tension he has experienced in his calculus class. In his opinion he feels that when you take higher level classes, other races look at you differently. In most cases, Junior has been the only Black male or one of a few Black males in the room. Junior has experienced many instances where classmates were hesitant to sit by him. In lieu of sitting next to him, classmates survey the classroom to sit next to Caucasian students.

Sue et al. (2007) would argue that the actions of Junior's classmates embody the same perceptions that take place when Black males are walking down the street and White women clutch their purses or swiftly walk to the other side of the street. Because nothing is known about Junior's academic strengths, his racial membership has served as the justification for



categorizing him as academically ill prepared and unworthy of his position in that classroom, with no evidence to support these claims (Abramo & Moio, 2009; Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009). The perceptions associated with Junior's skin equates to the "field" never being leveled for him. Images of his skin continue to serve as a reminder that society has not disengaged from past racially driven acts of overt and covert discrimination predicated upon beliefs that Black students are intellectually inferior.

As Junior provided more details about the interactions with classmates, he revealed that classmates do not actively receive his feedback about assignments and projects. In many instances Junior has taken additional courses beyond what his fellow pre-engineering students have taken. Although Junior has taken courses that demonstrate he is more prepared than his peers in calculus class, he is still made to feel he is not worthy of contributing to the group discussions or assignments. Junior is very much aware of the racial conflicts that exist in classes.

In addition to constraints that exist as Junior must continually prove he is intellectually capable of competing academically, he is also confronted by stereotypes that portray his presence as a physical threat. Junior's enrollment and attendance at a community college does not erase the fact that as a Black man, he will continue to fit the description of every Black male in this country who has not chosen to follow a productive road (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). As articulated by Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007), Black males on college campuses are often classified and must "assume the position" of criminals as a result of the level of racial profiling that exists among college campuses throughout the country. The reality that exists for Junior is that the detrimental effects of racial profiling do not end when he sets foot on the campus of Roosevelt-Moore College. Junior's racial membership ensures that descriptors such as *honor student*, *pre-engineering major*, and *resilient* will not be used to describe or define in him. In lieu of terms that promote a positive outlook, Junior cannot escape adjectives that describe him as

deficient, in need of developmental classes, and aloof.

As Junior communicated his experiences with racism, he shared that he feels the need to show White people that he is just as good if not better than them. He contends that he must carry himself in a manner that does not display that the misperceptions and generational scars of racism phase him or hinder his progress and outlook for the future. Junior's acknowledgment of possessing the desire to show White people he is just as good as them speaks to what scholars define as the *stereotype threat*. Taylor and Walton (2011) define stereotype threat as "a disruptive apprehension about the possibility that one might inadvertently confirm a negative stereotype about one's group could interfere with how well the student learns" (p. 1055). Despite the fact that Junior has received numerous accolades from the Dean's Office, his brown skin serves as a reminder that he will have to constantly navigate a web of stereotypes that have historically plagued Black men.

A portion of the interview required the participants to provide their opinions about what the literature refers to as generational "scars" that African-American males continue to bear in relation to historical actions of racism and denigration that have continuously led to discouraging educational outcomes for Black males. Kafele (2009) contends that any efforts to raise the achievement of Black males must acknowledge that they historically, currently, and daily carry the turmoil of racism on their backs and that these scars are a part of their history. In speaking to the element of generational curses that exist in this country, Junior theorizes that the ancestors of his classmates would perceive his enrollment in engineering classes as an indication that the quality of the coursework has shifted to a "slow" class rather than viewing his enrollment as an acknowledgement of his academic capability. Junior's thoughts reflect that White classmates don't feel that he belongs in upper echelon classes securing their beliefs that he is not worthy of pursuing something as good or as great as them.

Junior shared his exposure to racism by providing the following reflections about his classroom experiences:

The tension is high. Even if they don't say anything to you, you can tell the tension is high and that makes me kind of mad so to say, because I'm not out here robbing. I'm not out here. I haven't said anything to you. You don't know me, but yet you already dislike me because of who I am, my skin color, or where I come from. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

As an African-American male, Junior has been exposed to elements of oppression that are congruent with generations of Black males in this country; additionally, he has to navigate through and overcome elements of discrimination associated with being disabled. When asked to speak about elements of discrimination he has faced as a result of his disability, Junior's responses indicated that he is well aware of the misperceptions that exist about disabled individuals. As an individual identified to have a disability, Junior feels he is often judged and looked down upon by others. Junior passionately spoke about the need for people to see that having a disability does not negate the fact that first and foremost he is a human being. In addition to articulating the need to be viewed as a human being, Junior spoke intensely about being disabled not meaning one lacks the mental capacity in others; disabled means that you learn differently and that's okay:

I think being faced with a lot of challenges from grade school into college, even through high school, I think people need to know that people from say special ed or whatever, that they are actually, you know, people. We are human just like anybody else. We have friends, we have families. And I think people wrongly look down on those people just because of the way they learn or a certain disability they may have. (personal communication, November 30, 2012)

Within Junior's description of his experiences as a Black male with a disability, he

provides a space to discuss a concept that CRT scholars would refer to as antiessentialism/ intersectionality. Abrams and Moio (2009) describe this tenet as an acknowledgment of the intersectionality of various oppressions and argue that race serves as a primary factor that leads to the eclipse of other forms of exclusion. Junior exists in a society that has historically discriminated against Black males by classifying them as disabled at alarming rates and facilitating segregation via placing them in separate special education classrooms and facilities (Kunjufu, 2005; Weatherspoon, 2005). Abrams and Moio (2009) would further argue that Junior's multiple layers of oppression that exist as the result of him being a Black male with a disability from an urban, economically depressed environment equates to him being positioned in a complex social location. Though Junior exists within a web of multiple levels of oppressions resulting from his race, gender, socioeconomic status, and his identified disability, his racial membership will ensure that acts of discrimination and oppression continue to exist. Disclosure of Junior's socioeconomic status and his disability cannot be confirmed by his mere physical presence; however, his race cannot be concealed and will continue to serve as the initiator of oppression and discrimination.

The acknowledgment of the theory of intersectionality that exists for African-American males has been documented in the literature. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) provide the following argument regarding the concept of intersectionality that exists for Black males:

Black males carry the burden of two negative social identities they move through society, one as a member of the African-American race (i.e., anti-Black racism) and the other as a Black male (i.e., Black misandry or anti-Black male attitudes and oppression). p. 553

As an African American, Junior bears the generational scars of anti-Black racism that for centuries have labeled him as uneducable and academically inferior (Maryland Task Force,

2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). In addition to the racism that Blacks have endured for hundreds of years, Junior exists in racially driven stereotypes that exist for him as a Black male. Junior is shackled by the additional constraints of anti-Black male stereotypes that portray him as a constant physical threat to other members of society (Howard, 2013). Despite his existence in a multitude of oppressions, Junior is successfully attending college. Junior's enrollment in college confirms that he is fully aware of the choices he must make to ensure he is able to lead a productive life.

## **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Junior spoke consistently in his interviews about the influence of family members in his decision to attend college. Historically, Black families have been articulated within the literature as dysfunctional and a contributing factor to unfavorable outcomes for youth of color (Wilson, 1986). Wilson further asserts that "the focus of the Black family research has shifted from a pathological disorganization to a strength/resiliency model" (Wilson, 1986, p. 44). More recent studies in the area of family resilience "recognize parental strengths, family dynamics, and interrelationships and the social milieu as factors leading to successful outcomes" (Lobo, 2008, p. 33). Though a shift has occurred in the literature identifying Black families as a source of strength, Herndon and Hirt (2004) contend that the role of family influence within the African-American community is often absent from literature that speaks the role of family support, due to researchers' inability to examine the intersectionality of ethnicity, undergraduate experience, and family influence. Despite gaps that exist in articulating the role of family influence in African-American homes, Obiakor and Beachum (2005) argue that within the structure of African-American households, family plays a critical role in influencing all educational decisions and future aspirations of Black students (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). Within the context of the Black experience, past histories of racism and discrimination have led African-American parents to

frame their influence in their children's educational decision from a perspective that resembles advocacy (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005).

Junior's positive educational choices and decision to attend college can be attributed partly to his family. Research suggests that within Black families, there is a strong correlation between family support and student success (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Expounding upon the impact that families play in promoting success for African-American males, Lewis and Erskine (2008) suggest that by embracing a cradle-to-college pipeline, Black males are provided with resources, support, and all of the necessary ingredients that lead to productive outcomes. Within Junior's home, attending college is not viewed as something uncommon or unexpected. Junior's mother received a degree in nursing from Roosevelt Moore College and encouraged him to follow in her educational path. As expressed by Junior, he has several family members that have attended and graduated from college; the accomplishments of others have led Junior to embrace the belief that if others can do it, so can he. As research suggests that female-dominated homes contribute to the plight of African-American males in this country, Junior's enrollment in college contradicts literature that suggests that his family structure serves as risk factor rather than a protective factor (Grant & Grief, 2009).

Prior to attending Roosevelt-Moore College, Junior attended a private four-year institution in Illinois directly after high school. Due to pressing medical concerns, Junior had to return home so that his mother could monitor his medical care. In 2012, Junior was diagnosed with Stage 4 cancer and underwent extensive surgeries and chemotherapy treatments. Junior's attendance at a four-year school prior to attending Roosevelt Moore College creates a space to review the literature that speaks to the disparity that exists in college enrollment for Black males. It is imperative to review this literature in order to understand why this study was designed to study young men like Junior who are overcoming obstacles in pursuit of a college education.

Despite exploitations that portray Black males as uneducable, undesirable, immoral, amoral, and prone to violence, Black males demonstrate a desire to be educated (Maryland Task Force, 2007; Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Although the desire exists to be educated, Black males have represented less than 5% of the student population since 1976, according to college enrollment rates (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Trend data representing college enrollment for Black males suggest that for every one male enrolled in college, there are three Black females enrolled (Smith, Allen, & Danley, 2007). Smith, Allen, and Danley further argue that the dearth of male enrollment in college can be attributed to the fact that one in four Black males will be incarcerated between the ages of 20-24, whereas statistics suggest one in five Black males will enroll in college. As the data representing college enrollment for the past several decades has not been favorable, scholars have attempted to identify factors that have led to such disparities. Several scholars have argued that the overrepresentation of African-American males in special education and lower performing courses have ensured inferior educational practices that have ensured that Black males are not represented in gifted programs and courses to adequately prepare them for college (Kunjufu, 2005; Tatum, 2005; Weatherspoon, 2006). Black males in urban economically depressed areas lack access to college planning resources in their pursuit of a college degree. Despite the discouraging research investigating post-secondary education, Junior has taken the road less traveled and is successfully attending a community college.

The dynamics of Junior's family have resulted in him being resilient. O'Connor (2002) describes resilience as "an individually determined phenomenon as it seemingly rests on inherit traits, natural abilities, and personal character and temperaments when such accounts are then associated with those who beat the odds" (p. 856). O'Connor further maintains that within African-American homes, educational resilience is the result of relationships with parents and other adults who demonstrate warmth and caring but establish high expectations that include

monitoring their child's social interactions and academic behavior. As a result of the support Junior has received from his family, he is on a path toward obtaining a college degree and has not allowed himself to be statistically categorized as another Black male who has become a part of the penal system that has plagued the lives of so many young men like him. Given public school's inability to produce positive outcomes for African-American males, many scholars contend that institutionalized education serves as a pipeline to prison (Ferguson, 2001; Weatherspoon, 2006). Consistent within the research, significantly high proportions of criminal offenders in the juvenile justice system have been documented to be disabled and have been found eligible for special education services (Morrison & Epps, 2002; Robinson & Rapport, 1999; Sherwin & Schmidt, 2003). Ferguson (2001) asserts that "there is an immediate, ongoing connection between jails and schools" (p. 231).

Junior's enrollment in a community college symbolizes a journey to obtain a college degree that has been traveled by many Black males before him. For many Black males, community colleges represent their first and last experience with postsecondary education (Wood, 2012). Black males have placed a great deal of confidence in community colleges; however, two-year schools have failed to secure their upward mobility, advance their livelihood, or limit their exposure to the "community college penalty" (Long & Kurlaendar, 2009; Wood, 2012). Long and Kurlaendar (2009) further expound upon the concept of community college penalty by suggesting that community colleges create a penalty for students by diverting them away from coursework that immediately prepares them for four-year institutions by promoting vocation-tracked programs and by implementing attendance policies that do not promote full-time attendance. Despite the discouraging outcomes for Black males at community colleges, Junior has maintained his position on the Dean's List and will be graduating from Roosevelt Moore College with honors.



Junior currently resides in a low-income urban area heavily populated by drug activity, gang violence, and homicides of adolescents. In response to the violence and disadvantages that are manifestations of urban living, Junior must remain cognizant of individuals who have developed their own set of values and beliefs and engage in actions to secure their safety and position within the community (Parker & Maggard, 2009). The elements of violence and safety that exist in Junior's community influenced his decision to attend Roosevelt Moore College. Well aware of the dangers that exist with being a Black male in an urban community, Junior felt that attending a school located in a low crime area would best secure his safety and facilitate a positive learning environment. When asked about factors that influenced his decision to attend Roosevelt Moore College, Junior shared the experience of a friend of his who was robbed while on his way to a community college in an area of Illinois. As Junior reflected upon the experience of his friend, he disclosed that he felt it was critically important for him to feel safe about bringing his laptop to class and other items that could potentially lead to him being robbed on his way to school. In Junior's opinion, Roosevelt Moore College provides him with levels of security.

### **Theme 3: Teacher Relationships and Student Success**

The educational experiences of Black males in grades K-12 shape their decisions to attend college (Dancy & Brown, 2008). For many African-American males, their experiences in the elementary school setting have not been favorable. Classically captured in much of the literature that speaks to the academic achievement of African-American males, school districts have historically failed to meet the academic and socioemotional needs of African-American males (Weatherspoon, 2006; Farkas & Morgan, 2000). Junior's educational history is one that is all too common among many Black males (Weatherspoon, 2006; Farkas & Morgan, 2010; O'Connor & Fernandez, 2006). Junior's induction into the ranks of young Black males perceived

to be uneducable and in need of placement in separate special education classrooms began in fifth grade. Like many other Black males before him and many more to come after him, Junior received his elementary school education in urban school system staffed by predominately White teachers.

In concert with many schools across the country, Junior's educational attainments rested in the hands of predominately White teachers given the charge to implement curriculum driven by the dominant culture that marginalized Black males and forced them to suppress many aspects of their culture (hooks, 2003; Noguera, 2008). It can be argued that Junior's disengagement from a curriculum that did not reflect people who looked like him and did not incorporate opportunities for movement deeply rooted in his rich heritage equated to Junior being diagnosed with an attention deficit disorder, a learning disability, and placed in special education. Literature that speaks to the lack of academic achievement of African-American males consistently speaks of a lack of culture and cultural disconnects that ensure unfavorable educational outcomes for African-American males (Shockley & Frederick, 2010). Shockley and Frederick (2010) offer the following opinion regarding the absence of acknowledging the impact of culture and its psychological effects in educating Black children:

Although many innovative programs and projects have been put into place to help Black children, such innovations have fallen short of affording an educational experience that empowers the Black Community to control the psyche and physical spaces that [Blacks] call their own. (p. 1214)

Packaged in a contemporary form of separate-but-equal, Junior's fate of ascending from the inequalities that existed in special education took place to ensure that this educational experience would not deter his future desires to pursue an education beyond high school. Well documented and clearly agreed upon by scholars, K-12 experiences shape the educational

aspirations of African-American students in the pursuit of a college education (Dancy & Brown, 2008; Gibbs, 1988; Kujunfu, 2005; Noguera, 2008).

In describing his educational experiences and successes, Junior attributes a great deal of his success to relationships he established with teachers in elementary school. For African-American males, teacher perceptions lead to academic disengagement by fourth grade (Hargrove & Seay, 2011). An account of Junior's educational history indicates that his enrollment in special education by the fifth grade positioned him as one of the many Black males that the literature speaks to. Teacher perceptions and attitudes not only identify who should be referred for special education, they also create expectations that maintain a placement or departure from special education. As discouraging as the literature is in reporting educational outcomes for Black males, literature regarding ineffective teacher preparation programs, teacher perceptions, and student perceptions of their teachers is even more discouraging as it relates to the impact of these relationships on student performance (Eckert, 2012). Eckert further asserts that "lack of knowledge regarding how to train teachers for high poverty/high minority urban areas and the lack of distinction in the teacher credentialing process have created a policy problem that is especially detrimental to the urban districts that contain high poverty/high minority schools in the United States" (p. 76).

The literature has well documented that Black males exist in educational environments that perpetuate perceptions of them by invoking fear in others, resulting in them being undesirable and loathed on many levels (Howard, 2013). Howard further articulates the following opinion regarding the challenges that exist for Black males: "Loathed in various environments applauded in others, perhaps no other group of people are emulated yet despised simultaneously to the extent that Black men are today" (p. 55).

Within the public school setting, the stereotypical perpetuation of fear is exacerbated by

the fact that many urban schools are staffed by inexperienced White female teachers who have embraced these beliefs and contribute to the debilitating educational experiences of Black children (Shockley & Frederick, 2010). Expounding upon the impact of misperceptions in the education setting, Smith, Hung, and Franklin (2002) assert that “the misperceptions that guide the educational decisions for Black males solidify their experiences of institutional racism. Codrington and Fairchild (2012) situate today’s racism as institutionalized because policies and practices are developed within schools that negatively impact African-Americans and others.

Despite discouraging literature that exists regarding the lack of positive teacher relationships in school settings for Black males, Junior’s account cites a particular African-American teacher he encountered in his fifth grade special education class; the positive influence this teacher had highlights the importance of race and culture as they relate to educational achievement for students of color. Research suggests that African-American students achieve at higher rates when they encounter a “warm demander” in the educational setting (Ware, 2006). Ware defines a “warm demander” as “teachers who are successful with students of color because the students believed that these teachers did not lower their standards and were willing to help” (p. 436). In addition to setting high standards, they recognize culture as an overlooked variable in ensuring success for students of color (Ware, 2006). Junior’s description of this fifth grade teacher revealed that she was someone who believed in him and ensured that he internalized the belief that he was smart and capable of doing anything. Having served as his classroom teacher for several years, her support and relentless efforts to convey high academic expectations for Junior resulted in him being transitioned back into general education by his eighth grade year.

Junior passionately spoke about the support of this teacher and other individuals from his elementary school setting as people he could count on to be constant factors in his life and being there for him “no matter what.” Junior describes these people as individuals he could rely upon

for advice and help. Junior elaborated upon the help he received through sharing comments about his high school math and science teachers:

All four years in high school I had great math teachers, so I loved it. They always supported me and like if I came to them after or before class, they were always willing to work with me so I greatly appreciated that. My teacher was actually my track coach, too, so I talked to him outside of class while we had a track meet, about something physics, he would actually encourage me and tell me in real-life scenarios how to apply it. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

An important factor to note in understanding the impact of Junior's experience is the fact that his elementary school relationships provided him with the framework to develop a positive self-concept about who he was as a student. Junior's experiences with establishing and maintaining positive relationships with teachers speaks to the critical role of teachers in cultivating a culture of success or contributing to the academic failure of Black males (Kunjufu, 2005). As Junior emerged from elementary with a positive self-concept that reflected who he was as a person and a student, his zeal for education and desire to pursue excellence were defined and served as contributing factors to his future success. Though educated in an elementary school setting that labeled him academically deficient, the presence of an influential African-American teacher challenging Junior to think beyond the statistics and dilemmas that exist for Black males proved to affect his life well beyond elementary school and continues to serve as a source of support and encouragement.

The establishment of quality relationships is essential in sustaining positive outcomes for African-American high school students (Flowers et al., 2011). When reflecting upon his high school experiences, Junior spoke highly of a teacher who challenged him to do his best. He spoke about his teacher being "rough" on him and not allowing him to "slack off." Junior's

relationship with his teachers during his junior year served as the highlight of his high school experience. When asked for feedback to be given to former teachers related to the relationships that had been established, Junior extended a heartfelt thank-you to all of the teachers who set high expectations for him and worked with him before and after school to help him meet with optimal levels of success. Often plagued by low expectations predicated by acceptable educational practices that promote poor outcomes for Black students, students of color lack exposure to professionals who promote and sustain high expectations through implementing rigorous curriculum to ensure high school completion and college readiness (Flowers & Flowers, 2008). Junior's experience in high school reflected a supportive environment that provided him with a balanced curriculum that prepared him for college and incorporated the support he needed to graduate with honors.

Junior's high school experience raises questions that are left unanswered by literature that speaks to the achievement dilemmas and special education representation that exist for Black males. The literature comprehensively notes the diagnosis of Black males and their placement in special education. Absent, however, is literature that discusses their integration back into the general education setting. Grant (1992) suggests that the evaluation tools utilized to secure the placement of African-American students in special education are racially biased. Grant further asserts that Black students have consistently been placed in more restrictive environments, limiting appropriate access to the general education curriculum. Junior's diagnosis of having a learning disability documented the fact that he was deficient in critical academic areas, such as reading comprehension and fluency, and lacked the skills needed to complete many instructionally related tasks (Seifert & Espin, 2012).

Junior's completion of high school with honors from a school with favorable college placement statistics and limited special education resources challenges the argument that Junior

needed to be educated separately in a special education classroom. Research creates the space to raise the question of Junior's placement in special education as a manifestation of inferior educational practices and culturally biased referral processes that result in African-American males being overrepresented in special education. Krotek (2002) asserts that the overrepresentation of African-American students in special education is a result of biases that exist through arbitrary teacher referrals for special education that are reinforced by special education teams at multidisciplinary conferences to determine if the student is eligible for special education services. Regarding the existence of biased referral processes that exist in public school settings, Krotek provides the following opinion:

Teachers' initial referrals in fact start a process that usually leads to special education. The contention is that decisions to place students in special education don't begin at the MDC meeting. They occur de facto with the act of the referral. The effect of referrals being tainted by the teachers' subjective opinions are rubberstamped by the Multi-Disciplinary Team. (p. 3)

Consistently, African-American students fail to be well represented in college-bound courses designated for high achieving students (Graham & Erwin, 2011). Often perceived as being unable to meet the demands of college oriented curriculum, Black students are often tracked into developmental courses that will not ensure enrollment in higher education. Nichols, Kotchick, McNamara, and Hoskins (2009) argue that "the underrepresentation of African-American students among those pursuing college degrees reflects inherent disparities between minority and European youth in terms of educational opportunities and supports required to succeed in postsecondary education" (p. 26).

Though some would like to believe that the inauguration of the first African-American U.S. President for his second term would serve as a symbolic measure of the power of education

for Black males in this country, the reality is that “Black males continue to be perceived as problems prone to violence and deemed undesirable in certain circles” (Howard, 2013, 55).

Contrary to literature depicting the lack of academic achievement in these areas, Junior’s love for science and math originated from relationships formed with his physics and math teachers.

Through spending time with Junior before and after school, his teachers helped him to realize the practicality of physics in his everyday life. The impact of relationships in the high school setting that Junior spoke so intensely about provides credence to the impact of teacher relationships in promoting positive educational outcomes for African-American students. O’Connor (2002) posits that “at-risk students demonstrate higher levels of academic performance when they have teachers who are engaging and who express and develop sustained personal relationships with them while supporting them in both social and academic endeavors” (p. 857).

As Junior provided insight into factors that led to his success in high school, his participation in activities such as basketball and track were highlighted as positive aspects of his experience. Research studies examining traits of successful high school students suggest that involvement in school activities reduces delinquency and promotes bonding within the school setting (Hoffman & Xu, 2002). Involvement in school activities promotes the importance of team building, remaining focused on a goal, and demonstrating a sense of civic responsibility (Hoffman & Xu, 2002). Regarding the impact of school activities for African-American students from poverty-stricken communities, Nicholas, Kotchick, Mc Namara, and Hoskins (2009) provide the following opinion:

The exposure to and participation in community resources such as clubs, recreation centers, and organized groups may serve as a buffer against the deleterious outcomes typically associated with poverty-stricken neighborhoods.  
(p. 33)



Relationships established during high school were not limited to school personnel only. Through his interviews, Junior spoke in depth about the importance of forming relationships with family members and extended family members who had attended college. Within the structure of the African-American homes, the family serves as an engine that promotes successful choices (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005). Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggest that families nurture and develop Black students' academic capacity. Junior felt that having the influence of immediate and extended family members contributed to his decision to attend college.

When elaborating on the importance of being surrounded by individuals who have attended college, Junior provided the following reflections:

I would say the most helpful for me was being able to reach out, I guess, to say to be able to communicate with people that have been to college and kind of pick their mind on how a college experience would be and what to expect, and how to approach classes, and how to not just be in a box so to say. They prepared me mentally before I got there, and then physically. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Within the literature, extended African-American families consisting of friends and members of the community who play roles in promoting positive outcomes for African-American students are referred to as being joined by “fictive kinship” (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Considered to be seminal research devoted to defining and describing the impact of fictive kinships, Fordham and Ogbu define *fictive kinships* as “kinship-like relationships between persons not related by blood or marriage in a society, but who have reciprocal social or economic relationships” (p. 194). Fordham and Ogbu further expand the impact of fictive kinships in the Black community by providing the following perspective:

More specifically, fictive kinships used to describe the particular mindset, i.e., the specific worldview of those persons who are appropriately labeled “Black.” Since

Blackness is more than a skin color, fictive kinship is the concept used to denote the moral judgment of the group. Fictive kinship symbolizes a Black American sense of peoplehood in opposition to White America. (p. 195)

Fictive kinships play a critical role in helping Black students foster their collective identity. Ogbu (2004) describes collective identity as “people’s sense of who they are—the ‘we feeling’ of belonging” (p. 3). Fictive kinships provide individuals with a sense of who they are and where they belong through establishing connected networks of social support such as churches, neighbors, and members of the community who have overcome adversity (Brown, 2008; Ogbu, 2004). The presence of culture plays a significant role in establishing and maintaining fictive kinships. Kafele (2009) contends that fictive kinships promote a sense of identity, values, and attitudes from the neighborhoods in which Black students live. Fictive kinships, in which Black students exist, support students’ ability to perform academically and with educational pursuits beyond high school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Hendon & Hirt, 2004; Ogbu, 2004).

In addition to the impact of family structures, Junior’s interactions and relationships with teachers during his K-12 experience led to cultivating educational pursuits that ultimately resulted in his enrollment in college. Consistent with research regarding the importance of building and sustaining healthy relationships as a measure of promoting academic success for African-American students, Junior’s experiences confirm that teacher-student relationships serve a vital role in student achievement and as the foundation for building a desire to attend college (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Expounding upon the literature that speaks to the importance of teacher relationships in the role of promoting the success of African-American students, O’Connor (2002) asserts that “educational resilience can be attributed to relationships with parents and other adults who were warm and caring but establish high expectations” (p. 857).

#### **Theme 4: High School Transitional Meetings**

Discussions about the process of participating in transition meetings reflected positive memories for Junior. In sharing his experiences, he felt that the focus of the meetings centered around encouraging him to keep up the good work and providing him with updates on how he was progressing on his work. When asked to reflect upon the discussion that took place at his transition meetings, Junior provided the following summary:

Well most of the discussion was to continue the good work because they seen how I progressed as a student throughout the four years I was in high school. And they seen how much more encouraged I was and better I was when it came to academic studies. So they encouraged me to continue that and to always work as hard as I did and to pretty much take the bull, how do they say it, bull by the horn. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Absent from his reflections were any comments about the college application process and resources that would be available to him as a disabled student. His transition meetings also provided opportunities for his teachers to describe some of the pitfalls he might encounter, while providing advice to ensure his success. Junior's experience of not being connected with resources to assist with his pursuit of a college degree is not uncommon among disabled individuals seeking to pursue a college degree. Research suggests that many of the poor post-school outcomes for students with disabilities can be associated with the gaps that exist in successful transition planning and the lack of accountability that exists among IEP teams (Diehm, Paler, Lee, & Schrorer, 2010). Junior's experience is consistent with research that describes discouraging college attendance rates for students of color. Noeth and Wimberly (2001) explicates that African-American students utilize college planning software in less than 50% of their efforts to prepare for college, suggesting that they lack an understanding of the essential components required to properly prepare for college. Literature regarding the transition

process for students of color is limited, but consistently conveys that it is a complex process that does not adequately address the cultural needs of students. Trainor (2008) asserts that efforts aimed at improving post-secondary outcomes for students of color must examine issues of inequitable outcomes and gaps in achievement that exist for marginalized groups.

Absent from the transition process for Junior was specific information that described the services available for him in a college setting. At the collegiate level, students with disabilities are provided with resources and support via the Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Kortering, Julnes, & Edgler, 1990). The Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) enacts mandates that ensure that students in need of accommodations are formally assessed in a systematic manner on college campuses across the country (Denhart, 2008). When asked if he disclosed his status as a disabled student to the Office of Access and Accommodations at Roosevelt Moore College, Junior indicated that he had not disclosed this information and that he was not taking advantage of any of the services offered for students with disabilities. Although Junior had not disclosed his disability status to the college, he did reveal that he utilized a math tutor for calculus regularly. In utilizing a tutor, Junior communicated that he would often “pick” the tutor’s brain. Junior also revealed that he does access a tutor to get assistance with his writing assignments. He expressed that sometimes he has a difficult time taking ideas from his head and making sure they make sense on paper.

Junior’s decision to conceal his disability from college professionals provides a forum to discuss areas of psychological factors associated with being a Black person in this country. Jones (1972) identifies the psychological effects of being a Black person in this country as *Black psychology*. Within this theoretical framework, Jones suggests that the impact of racism and alienation have promoted perceptions of inferiority among Blacks, leading them to internalize feelings of fragility and inadequacy. While dated in its contribution to the field of psychology,

this theoretical framework is supported by more recent studies and attributes theories like Jones's seminal work to self-concept development in African-American students (Tatum, 2005; Laubscher, 2005; Obiakor & Beachum, 2005)

As a result of historical racial mistreatment by the dominant culture leading to issues of mistrust, Black males fail to seek assistance from White professionals when needed (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). Lindsey and Marcell further assert that in regards to seeking assistance from White professionals, "Black males suffer from a fear associated with feeling like White professionals will not understand their unique cultural perspective" (p. 355). Though Junior acknowledges he utilizes a tutor for math and requires some assistance at times with writing, he was not comfortable with disclosing his disability status to instructors of the office that provides academic support and accommodations for individuals with disabilities. Lindsey and Marcell (2012) contend that norms within the Black community require males to be perceived as strong; failure to appear strong at all times equates to one being perceived as being less than a man. Junior embodies the norms and values that exist within the Black community. As expressed in his interviews, Junior wants people view him as someone who is smart and not someone who has a disability.

Speaking more emphatically, Junior stated that if he left this earth today, he would want others to remember him in the following manner:

I want to be known as a nice guy but he was smart. He was intelligent beyond belief. He was able to talk to people and they wouldn't know he might have had a learning disability when he was younger because he actually worked hard to better himself. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Junior's interviews suggest that he desires to be perceived as normal and not defined by a disability that symbolizes elements of weakness. Junior's decision to not disclose his status of

being disabled also gives credence to the fact that disparities exist in the level in which Black students and White students are aware of resources that exist and access them (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Junior's racial membership ensures that he is at an even greater risk of being ill-prepared and uninformed about resources available to him in the college setting (Bell, 2010; Noeh & Wimberly, 2001; Tatum, 2009). The endemic nature of race cannot be extracted from conversations that focus on discouraging post-secondary outcomes for students of color because they determine the level of access to resources (Zhang & Smith, 2011). Zhang and Smith further suggest that social capital in the form of social networks and organizations equates to increased access to resources and information about college. For Black students from disadvantaged families, their access to college networks are fewer, resulting in fewer positive benefits (Tierney & Venegas, 2006). The lack of access to college resources is evident in the home and school environment for Black males. Research conducted by Noeth and Wimberly (2001) in the field of examining the college preparation processes for African-American students concluded that African-American students utilize college planning software in less than 50% of their efforts to prepare for college, suggesting that they lack an understanding of the essential components required to properly prepare for college. Efforts aimed at improving post-secondary outcomes for students of color must examine issues of inequitable access to resources that contribute to the gaps that exist.

### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

Junior spoke at length about factors he felt contributed to his success. At the top of his list of attributes was the need to surround himself with people who share the same potential as he does. Junior surrounds himself with a group of young men with whom he has been friends with since third grade; they engage in healthy competition to see who can get the best grades. In addition to competing with their grades, they also encourage each other to do their best in all

aspects of their lives. In urban areas, peer pressure and peer association greatly impact decision-making patterns for students of color. Zimmerman (2004) asserts that in communities plagued by violence and crime, youth often make decisions about affiliation that will ensure their safety. In Junior's case he chooses to associate with positive peers rather than basing his decision on an issue of safety within the neighborhood. Nichols et al. (2008) maintains that positive peer relations among African-American students promotes resiliency. When speaking about his chosen group of friends, Junior proudly shares the following thoughts:

Yeah, that's what we need to do set ourselves apart from everybody else. Because it's only a group of, you can say a group of Black males that are actually wanting to do that, and then you've got the other group that's looking at them like "Oh, they're nerds. We got all the girls over here." And instead of us feeling down or being influenced by what they have, knowing what we will have is encouraging for us. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Junior passionately expressed his belief that people often see attending college as a dream and not a reality for most Black males. In Junior's own words:

Me and my brother are in college you know it's like a dream. And being that me and my brother are in college, you know it's like not only a dream but it's something that can be reached if you try hard enough. No matter where you come from, I look at it as if the person wants to do it, they going to do it. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

Junior spoke about having an inner drive to succeed that must come from and be sustained from within. Research focused on factors that promote success for students with disabilities identifies the drive to succeed as self-motivation and determination (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; Getzel & Thoma, 2008).

At the conclusion of the third interview, I asked Junior if he had anything else to add to

the study that he felt I did not address. Junior suggested that in the area of factors that lead to success I needed to address the issue of confidence. Junior felt that being confident was critical to one's success. Junior posed a question that would require one to look in the mirror and ask themselves how they felt about themselves as opposed to what others thought about them. I included this question as a part of the study because I felt it added a great deal of depth in accurately capturing Junior's inner strength and elements that have sustained his resilience.

When asked to answer the question about what he saw when he looked in the mirror, Junior provided the following response:

I just, I think I want to help other people with my life so that they can look at me and be like, you know what, he came from this, he faced this, and yet he still grows from it all. Like you would have not known I was sick or you wouldn't have known that technically I wasn't supposed to graduate from college or I wasn't supposed to be an author. You wouldn't have thought it would happen because of statistics of what people or the environment or people may say that people with certain disabilities might have like me. (personal communication, December 4, 2012)

In addition to having the inner drive to succeed, Junior attributes his success to the support of his teachers. Conversations about the impact of teachers revealed that they have the power to influence student's ambitions to attend college or their lack of support will cause students to not want to strive for bigger and better things. For students who are often described in the literature as "high risk," it is critically important to develop and sustain relationships with teachers who will support his academic and social endeavors (O'Connor, 2002).

A constant reality that Junior must address is the influence of neighborhood drug dealers and the influence of the street. Junior identifies the support of his family and mentors as positive factors that influenced his decision to choose college over the streets. Mentors have helped him



to realize that selling drugs promises more money in a week than most people could think of; however, college ensures him a life of not looking over his shoulder and increases his chances of not ending up in jail or shooting someone.

Embedded within Junior's interviews, he spoke about the impact of having mentors in his life. For African-American males, mentorship plays a critical role in their academic success, as well as assisting them in their identity formation process (Gordon, Iwamoto, Word, Potts & Boyd, 2009). Gordon et al. further assert that "within the realm of research, the concept of mentoring Black males by exposing them to positive relationships with a non-parental adult evolved as a result of the need for innovative and rigorous interventions developed with the intent of addressing problems faced by adolescents" (p. 279). The design of mentorship programs may take on various forms and involve multiple activities depending upon the needs youth exhibit (Brown, 2009). Woodland (2008) conducted a research study examining the influence of after-school mentorship programs on young Black males. As a result of this study, Woodland provided the following findings:

Mentor model after- school programs show great promise for African-American males. African-American children who feel they have someone to talk to do better behaviorally and academically. Mentors are associated with increased college attendance rates among Black youth (p. 245).

Junior's involvement with mentors assisted with his ability to develop and sustain resilience when faced with academic and environmental obstacles that have often led to more non-favorable results for African-American males. Research conveying educational outcomes for African-American males explicates that Black males aged from 13-18 rank near the top in every indicator of school failure such as low achievement, drop-out rates, and absenteeism (Grant & Dieker). Despite the discouraging statistics, Junior has demonstrated resilience in his academic

endeavors, made positive life choices, and charted a course to a college degree. Junior's enrollment in college ensures he will not contribute to the discouraging statistics conveying African-American males in a state of crisis.

### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

Junior's desire to attend college also rests on the fact that he feels that a degree in engineering would allow him to one day become a senior engineer for a firm. After securing such a position, Junior hopes to own his own firm. He says he would like to "empower the minds of young Black men" to ensure they understand that "they can do anything no matter what some may look at them as or how they might be perceived." Junior's perspective regarding the need to empower Black men demonstrates his knowledge of the gaps that exist in job opportunities for men of color (Grant & Dieker, 2011). It can be argued that Junior's desire to empower other Black men is a result of the support he received through his fictive kinships. Deeply embedded within Junior's interviews was his passion about the challenges he faces as a Black man and his stated desire is to give back to others.

### **Theme 7: Voices from a Black Perspective**

Scholars in the fields of education, counseling, sociology, and anthropology have consistently proclaimed that Black males in this country are in a state of crisis. Commonly used to describe this state are buzz words such as *at-risk*, *disengaged*, *ill-prepared*, and *criminally involved* (Davis, 2003; Erskinne & Lewis, 2008; Grant & Grief, 2009; Kujunfu, 2005). Though the literature is heavily saturated in the dilemmas that exist, absent are empirical studies highlighting evidence of resilience, persistence, and intellectual giftedness in Black students (Howard, 2013). As the gap of literature exists that highlights positive outcomes for Black males, even more daunting is the task of locating literature that communicates these positive outcomes from the perspective of these resilient young men. As a methodology, CRT provides a space to

capture these perspectives through its ability to understand the experiences of marginalized individuals through storytelling (Abrams & Moio, 2009).

Consistent within literature that speaks to the impact of CRT as a vehicle to express the voices of oppressed individuals of color, Junior is well aware that the voices of Black male special education students are seldom heard regarding their perspective of their educational experiences (Grant & Dieker, 2011). When asked what led to his decision to participate in this research study, Junior provided strong opinions about the absence of the Black males perspective and that his participation could help fill that gap. As articulated by Junior:

I was able to speak on my own behalf personally from how do I say, how I feel different Black men probably don't get to speak when you know. I don't know how to say this? There's a lot. . . Pretty much just being heard. Knowing the ups and downs of going through college. I mean people don't always get a male. . . that is Black perspective because they don't look at us as going to college in the first place. So once I attended college and had learned and experienced different things, I think other people should know at first it's scary but it's not. (personal communication, November 30, 2012)

Junior's opinion that society does not view African-American males in the context of individuals that attend college is critical to note in this study because it supports this researcher's goal to add scholarly research to this absent and much needed area of study. In addition to the gaps that exist in scholarly research, gaps also exist in the presence of positive media exposure for Black males. In the absence of research that highlights the academic achievement of Black males, Caston (2012) asserts that the media emphasizes the negative actions of Black males instead of focusing on their academic achievement. Caston further suggests that these pejorative representations are highly problematic for populations that have been historically marginalized.

Junior's passion to be heard is evident throughout his interviews. Junior's willingness to

participate in the study stemmed from his desire to be able to speak on his own behalf about Black men. In his opinion, Black men are not given the opportunity to say positive things about themselves. Fear is a factor that Junior had to battle in his ambitions to pursue a college degree. In discussing fears associated with being a college student, Junior confided that after having the support of friends and family, he realized that college was not as scary as he thought. He later shared that he feels it is critical to share with others the importance of believing in themselves and their abilities.

In addition to being afforded the opportunity to speak on behalf of other Black males like himself, Junior shared the need to speak on behalf of individuals with disabilities. From Junior's perspective, he expressed that by sharing his story it might help to enlighten other disabled people to understand that it is okay to learn in a different way. In spite of the challenges, Junior urges disabled individuals to not lose sight of the human element of who they are; it is the fact that they are human that makes them the same as everyone else. Research suggests individuals with disabilities are often made to feel inadequate and inferior when compared to their peers in the eyes of professionals (Hartman & Haaga, 2002). Junior acknowledges the fact that society looks down on him because he has been identified as learning disabled and has dismissed him as lacking the mental capacity of others. As Junior spoke intensely about his desires to enlighten and encourage others, a theme that emerged consistently throughout his interview was his desire to rise above labels that attempt to define him by equating a disability with an inability to succeed in life.

### **Kylan**

#### **Theme 1: Defying Racial Stereotypes and Generational Scars**

Kylan's educational and life choices have led to him being described as an African-American male college student between the ages of 18 and 24, with no history of criminal

involvement. Though simplistic in its presentation, a description of Kylan's life speaks volumes regarding the plight of Black males. Smith, Allen, and Danley (2007) assert that one in four Black males between the ages of 18 and 24 will be incarcerated within their lifetimes. Regarding the alarming rates at which African-American males are incarcerated in this country, Alexander (2012) suggests that the mass incarceration of Black males is part of a set agenda with the following purpose: "The system of mass incarceration operates with stunning efficiency to sweep people of color off the streets, lock them in cages, and then release them to into an inferior second-class status" (p. 103).

Kylan represents an image of Black males that exists but is often overshadowed by media attention that promotes Black males as violent, uneducated, unproductive members of society (Alexander, 2012). Despite Kylan's enrollment in a community college with a graduation date quickly approaching, he must bear the scars of racism and discrimination that generations of Black men before him have endured. Ogbu (2004) asserts that historically, "the overarching ideology of White America was that Black Americans belonged to a race that was inferior to the White race biologically, culturally, and socially" (p. 7). Kylan's skin negates his academic accomplishments and places him a position to receive racially driven physical or verbal assaults based on his racial membership. Parker and Lynn (2002) argue that racism has heretofore been understood as a willful act of aggression against a person based upon their skin color" (p. 8). Skin color as an important vehicle that fuels racism: "White people benefit from a racist society with unearned advantages that are based solely on skin color" (Rogers & Mosely, 2006, p. 466).

In Kylan's opinion, he feels that there are many stereotypes within society that have served as generational curses for many Black men. Kylan further expounds upon this belief by providing the following thoughts:

There are a lot of stereotypes that are out there that must be torn down. There are

a lot of negative thoughts and perceptions that are out there about African-American men. All of them are not standing on the corner, but you have those who are graduating with masters and PhDs. (personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Kylan and Junior share the same opinion regarding their belief that positive Black males are not given the attention they deserve. As revealed in his interview, Kylan feels that college-educated men need to be placed on the frontlines to show young men in African-American communities and in schools that it is possible for them to obtain college degrees. As the topic of defying existing stereotypes about Black males continued to evolve, Kylan suggested that many of the chains and barriers that facilitate generational scares could be broken if Black males were exposed to the richness of their culture:

We have a rich history so we are inventors and a lot of them don't know that piece. You know we are mathematicians, and a lot of them don't know that piece. So it's just simply educating them on their history so that they know it is possible too. So we have to kind of empower them on the history in order for them to know how great their future can be. (personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Throughout his interviews, Kylan said repeatedly that, through exposure, Black males could understand that being great is within them because they are descendants of mathematicians. Kylan's perspective of incorporating culture as a tool to promote more positive outcomes for Black males is shared by several scholars in the field of education. Kafele (2009) asserts that there are cultural conditions associated with being a Black male that are devalued in the education system, contributing to poor educational outcomes. Contributing to the importance of culture in the educational setting, Freeman (2006) argues that "cultural alienation and annihilation have had a devastating effect on Black students' participation in education" (p. 216).

Unlike Junior, Kylan's interviews did not convey the thick description of overt acts of

racism in pursuit of his college degree; however, his interviews clearly articulated that he is very aware of the existence of racial stereotypes with the intended purpose of defining and portraying him. Kylan's acknowledgment of stereotypes centered more around what society perceives he should be. Society's belief that all African-American males fit certain criteria and display similar mannerisms supports aspects of microaggressions. Solorzano, Ceja, and Yosso (2000) assert that "any efforts intended to explore microaggression concepts must incorporate a critical examination of racial stereotypes and their impact on those being oppressed. Racial stereotypes are woven deeply into the fabric of U.S. society, yet their daily effects are misunderstood" (Solarzano, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000, p. 62).

One stereotype that Kylan has constantly defied is that Black men are not intelligent. Historically, Black men have been perceived to be intellectually inferior and incapable of conducting themselves in a manner that exemplifies confidence and intelligence (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006; Mc Gee & Martin, 2011; Ogbu, 2004). In tandem with Junior's exposure to effects predicted by stereotype threat theories, Kylan exists in an environment in which "Blacks have been socially constructed as biologically, intellectually, and culturally inferior to Whites" (Mc Gee & Martin, 2001, p. 1353). As a result of being acculturated to believe that intelligence is associated with being White, Kylan exists in an environment in which his educational and life choices have raised levels of dissension among his peers. Similar to Junior's experiences with how he is perceived by his peers, in Kylan's experience, because he can speak well and articulate his words properly, many peers has perceived him as being a lame or not a part of a cool gang. As expressed by Kylan, many of his peers equate his ability to speak well with "acting White." Kylan's ability to disengage himself from the negative perception of his peers has been characterized as *stereotype management*. McGee and Martin (2011) define stereotype management as "academic resilience in spite of negative intellectual and societal

stereotypes and other forms of racial bias” (p. 1354).

Speaking very passionately about a conversation he had with a co-worker about intelligence stereotypically being portrayed as “acting White,” Kylan shared the following details:

We cannot afford to associate being intelligent with being White. Being intelligent is just simply being intelligent. Does acting intelligent mean to act White? And I definitely say no, it’s just simply acting intelligent and having the skills or talents that are needed to go to the next level. Because that’s what people look for they look for intelligent people. They want someone who can speak well and someone who could communicate their message. (personal communication, December 1, 2012)

As is well-documented in the literature, African Americans have been conditioned to believe that being intelligent means abandoning one’s heritage and embracing a European culture (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Laubscher, 2005; Ogbu, 2004). When African-American students embrace academics and strive to do their best, they are accused of “acting White” and insulting their race. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) conducted what is considered to be landmark research in the area of identity conflicts that arise when Black students embrace their academics. In their research study with high performing Black students perceived by others as acting White, Fordham and Ogbu provided the following explanations regarding academic success being perceived as “acting White”:

One major reason Black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic success. This problem arose mostly because White Americans traditionally refused to acknowledge that Black Americans are capable of intellectual achievement and partly because Black Americans subsequently began to doubt their own intellectual ability [and] began to define academic success as White people’s



prerogative and began to discourage their peers. (p. 190)

Kylan and Junior share the same belief that Black men are not perceived to be intelligent. As previously articulated in Junior's experiences, Kylan's racial membership as a Black man and his disclosure of having a disability provided a space to discuss the concept of intersectionality of multiple layers of stereotypes that Kylan must navigate. Similar to Junior's experience, Kylan's brown skin inducts him into a racial membership of marginalized individuals who have historically been denigrated and exploited at the hands of White people because "it makes White people feel good to think they are more intelligent than Blacks" (Ogbu, 2004, p. 7; Wilson, 1978). As a Black male, Kylan bears the burden of being racialized as a threat to society that disproportionately places Black males in special education classrooms (labeled as having behavior disorders or being cognitively delayed), suspends or expels them at greater frequency than their White counterparts, and finds them excessively represented in the penal system (Alexander, 2012; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Kunjufu, 1995). Kylan must display resilience in pursuing an education that is not perceived as "common" for someone with his history of receiving special education services that precluded him from having consistent interaction with nondisabled peers during his K-12 experience. Despite the challenges and perceptions that exist among his peers and society, Kylan demonstrated resilience in his ability to internalize what it means to be Black, find the value in being Black, and use these values as value affirmations to overcome the detrimental effects of the stereotype threat (Davis, et. al., 2006; Taylor & Walton, 2011).

## **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Kylan is a first-generation college student, and his level of family support in pursuit of a college degree is different from Junior's. Kylan's family's educational experiences do not provide him with as many resources as Junior's. Though his family is limited in financial capital,

Kylan firmly believes that families play a major role in process of encouraging Black students to attend college. He did say that his sister began a program in childcare at Roosevelt Moore College but did not complete it. Though his sister did not complete the program, Kylan still felt that her brief enrollment served as a bridge to the resources available to him at the college. His decision to attend college confirms research that suggests that in Black households families play a critical role in determining the educational endeavors of their children (Obiakor & Beachum, 2005).

Black males convey a desire to attend college; however, their enrollment and completion rates in higher education are dismal when compared to other racial groups (Palmer & Maramba, 2011). Kylan's determination to pursue a college degree in the face of such statistics, which suggest he is not likely to complete the requirements necessary to obtain the degree, speaks to his level of commitment and perseverance. Like Junior, Kylan received his educational services in separate special education classrooms that lacked the rigor necessary to prepare him for college (Freeman, 2006). Despite being faced with obstacles such as limited access to college resources, a lack of exposure to family members who have successfully attended college and the truncated experience of special education classrooms that limit access to a rigorous curriculum, Kylan has demonstrated resilience in his academic endeavors. Morales (2008) defines academic resiliency as educational achievements and outcomes that occur despite an individual being exposed to statistical risk factors.

In addition to sustaining academic resilience, Kylan also demonstrates resilience in the area of the development of a positive racial identity. Embedded within Kylan's interviews were descriptions of the richness of Black culture and assessments of how providing youth with more opportunities to learn their history would aid efforts to curtail the stereotypes that currently exist surrounding negative images of Black males. Wright (2011) postulates that positive racial

identities, pro-Black identities, and pro-academic attitudes are factors that high achieving, resilient Black students possess. Wright further maintains that “African-American youth who are successful cannot simply ignore or discount their racial-ethnic identity in negotiating and navigating their educational experience” (p. 613).

### **Theme 3: Teacher Relationships and Student Success**

Teacher relationships play a critical role in fostering educational outcomes for Black males. Unfortunately, for many Black males, their experiences in elementary school consist of multiple disciplinary infractions, high referrals for special education, and ultimately, a direct pipeline to the prison system (Ferguson, 2001). Kylan’s educational journey could easily be duplicated in any urban school district that primarily serves students of color in high poverty areas. Educated in the same elementary school district as Junior, Kylan’s induction into special education was the result of being educated in an urban school district staffed primarily by White teachers. As in Junior’s case, it could be argued that Kylan’s disengagement in the curriculum leading to his placement in special education could be attributed to the fact that he was expected to embrace a curriculum that did not acknowledge or embrace the richness of his cultural heritage. African-American males exist within an educational setting that does not value their culture, implying that they do not exist (Kunjufu, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003; Tatum, 2005). As school districts continue to acknowledge the impact of culture in fostering positive educational outcomes for African-American males, the high rates of referral and placement of Black males in special education will continue to permeate toxic, nonproductive educational settings.

In much of the same regard as Junior, Kylan attributes a great deal of his educational success to the relationships he fostered with teachers:

Throughout my educational experience in both elementary school and high school, I always built solid relationships with my teachers, to always helping out, assisting, volunteering after school, because I think that it's you know, it's just healthy to do so. But I have always had positive connections with those in the role of teacher. (personal communication, December 1, 1012)

Kylan's reflections of building healthy relationships with teachers confirm the importance of teacher relationships in fostering positive educational outcomes for African-American males (Eckert, 2012). Educated in the same school district as Junior, Kylan ascended above stereotypes that perpetuated the need for teachers to fear his presence and moved forward in becoming involved in school clubs and community-sponsored activities. His ascension into becoming civically active began in elementary school. As a member of Toast Masters<sup>5</sup>, Kylan was exposed to opportunities to sharpen his oration skills through debates and competitions. He attributes his success to his involvement in activities and after school clubs:

I did a lot of activities after school while in high school so, you know, I would probably consider that as mentoring, you know, working with teachers, having them take me places that I have never been and giving me new experiences. So I think that played the part of mentoring, participating in those afterschool programs. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

Kylan's involvement in mentorship programs can be viewed as a vehicle that helped to improve his academic functioning and critical thinking skills. Du Bois (2011) suggests that "mentoring affects cognitive development through interactions with adults that foster the ability to develop new thinking skills" (p. 62). In addition to being involved in mentoring programs, Kylan acknowledged that he also received tutoring after school from his teachers in high school. His involvement in after-school activities served to promote his success and created a space to

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<sup>5</sup> Toast Masters International Club provides a supportive and positive learning experience in which members are empowered to develop communication and leadership skills resulting in greater self-confidence and growth.

discuss the importance of after-school activities for Black males in low socioeconomic areas. Woodland (2008) maintains that “after-school programs, with their focus on education and creating safe environments, are uniquely suited to the needs of Black males, who because of inadequate schooling and, often, residence in underserved neighborhoods, continue to be plagued by poorer health and academic outcomes than any other racial group” (p. 537). Kylan’s involvement in after-school activities served as a foundation to help guide him in the importance of civic responsibility and its role in contributing to the greater good of any organization. For students of color, involvement in after-school programs fosters the development of personal and social assets needed to develop into positive, contributing members of society (Perkins, et al., 2007).

Kylan’s interviews revealed that in addition to after-school clubs, he was very involved with the community by working closely with many elected officials and community-oriented endeavors. Kylan’s interactions with elected officials and other community residents served as the foundation of his capacity to begin to form his civic identity. As a result of his involvement with elected officials and community residents, Kylan established an organization that focuses on improving the quality of life for youth in the community. In addition to his organization, he has pursued the route of an aspiring politician through becoming a candidate for village trustee in two separate elections; though he did not win a seat, he is still civically involved in the community. He attributes the relationships fostered with community officials as a contributing factor in his pursuit of attending college:

Well, I worked with a lot of elected officials in the community and while around them they would always ask, you know, “What college are you going into?” “What you going to major in?” And that created an atmosphere that it was not an option whether I was going or not. I knew I was going to college because of the

tone that was set for me from the very beginning. And it comes through in my experience as well. Community residents, elected officials, teachers, everyone played a role in the process. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

Countless scholars have documented the fact that gaps exist in the educational achievement of African-American students when compared to White students (Bonner, 2000; Davis, 2003; Kunjufu, 2005; Lewis & Erskinne, 2008; Ogbu, 2004; Wright, 2011). In addition to gaps that exist in the educational achievement of African-American students, gaps also exist in civic knowledge among urban youth when compared to White youth (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2002). Consistent with the gaps that exist in academic achievement, public schools serving urban youth fail to utilize the educational setting as opportunity for improving civic knowledge and engagement among youth (Shiller, 2013). Rubin (2007) articulates that the route to developing civic identity among young people must be predicated on the belief that young people are change agents who can improve their communities. In a study exploring the interactions of youth exposed to community-based organizations, Shiller (2013) identified many factors that support the need for urban youth to be engaged in community organizations as an opportunity to develop civic identity that ultimately leads to a sense of efficacy. Shiller provided the following opinion regarding the impact of exposing urban youth to community-based organizations committed to social justice:

Community Based Organizations provide young people with the opportunity to explore their own identity as well as oppression they may have faced or perpetrated themselves on others. Moreover, it facilitates the expansion of young people's social network, a key to developing efficacy at a political or civic level. (p. 80)

Research in the area of urban youth civic engagement suggests that the lack of involvement is due to feelings of alienation from their communities, leading to a lower sense of

efficacy (Kirshner, Strobel, & Fernandez, 2002). Despite the gaps that exist in civic engagement for African-American youth, Kylan has demonstrated resilience in his ability to acquire knowledge about his community and has used this knowledge to evolve into a change agent. In addition to his civic work, Kylan has established relationships with elected officials, community residents, and teachers that illustrate the resilience he has developed.

When asked about relationships with his family, Kylan did not elaborate a great deal about interactions that have led to his enrollment at Roosevelt Moore College. Kylan provided brief information about his sister's enrollment in college. His limited responses regarding his family's involvement in providing resources to support his educational endeavors is consistent with research regarding first-generation college students. Arnesto (1998) purports that educationally disadvantaged first-generation college students lack the home and community resources needed to ensure their educational success. During a portion of the interview, I asked Kylan if there was anything he wanted to add to help strengthen this research study. He felt that an important message to convey to other college students was the importance of utilizing tools to overcome struggles that present themselves during the process of attending college:

So college can be very challenging; you know, life is challenging. And life, you know, it happens to us. But the most important thing is how we respond to it because things are going to happen and through my process when it was starting off in the beginning when things wasn't working out quite well the first tool I used is not giving up and being consistent. So that played a key role in me finishing. (personal communication, December 8, 2013)

Despite being faced with the reality of having limited resources within his family structure, Kylan has demonstrated resilience in his ability to overcome adversities in his pursuit of a college education. Kylan has demonstrated self-advocacy skills in his endeavors gain access

to information on his own to ensure his enrollment and success at Roosevelt Moore College.

#### **Theme 4: High School Transitional Meetings**

Consistent with Junior's experience, Kylan felt that his high school transition meetings were very positive. In Kylan's opinion, his high school IEP meetings helped him to identify areas of strengths and weaknesses. He felt that the meetings helped him to focus on what he was going to need to be successful at Roosevelt Moore College by providing focus. Kylan felt that his transition meetings did connect him with some level of resources. Important to note is that Kylan felt his meetings provided him with a guide that prepared him to get to the next level. When asked to convey feedback to former teachers who assisted in his transition process, he provided the following reflective thoughts about his initial transition onto a college campus:

It was difficult, challenging, and almost thought to be impossible, with starting the process. And I would definitely encourage them to just go beyond making sure that they equip students with the correct resources and tools to make the transition appear easy. Because it would have been very easy for me to give up, but me being the fighter I am, I continue to move forward on my faith to do what seemed to impossible at the time. (personal communication, December 1, 2012)

As a result of having a bridge to connect him to potential resources available at Roosevelt Moore College, Kylan took advantage of services provided for disadvantaged students of color through the TRIO program.<sup>6</sup> Arnesto (1998) purports that a major goal of TRIO programs is to assist low-income minority students to meet basic college requirements, while also increasing college retention statistics. Kylan's educational experience with TRIO programs consisted of him accessing tutoring, as well as financial assistance to pay for his classes. Kylan shared that one of

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<sup>6</sup> Federal TRIO programs are federal outreach and student services programs designed to identify and provide services to individuals from disadvantaged backgrounds. TRIO assists first-generation college students and individuals with disabilities with the academic pipeline from middle school to post-baccalaureate programs. Source: <http://www.2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/opc/trio/index.html>.



the benefits of being involved with the TRIO programs was that they helped him to track his academic progress and assisted him with staying on track and making healthy decisions. For many students of color, TRIO provides a critical level of support that cannot be duplicated in the home.

In tandem with Junior's experience with accessing resources or disabled students, Kylan took advantage of tutoring and financial assistance but did not disclose his disability status nor did he utilize any of the services offered by the Office of Accommodations. Given Kylan's vivid account of the stereotypes that exist to hinder African-American males, it can be argued the issues of mistrust and mistreatment led to his decision to not seek assistance from college professionals (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). In addition to issues associated with race, one must examine the stigma attached to being identified as learning disabled at the post-secondary level. Hartman and Haaga (2002) express that only a minority of college students with learning disabilities access resources and supports in place to assist with their academic performance. Hartman and Hagga (2002) further suggest that student's perceptions that college professionals will view their disability as a confirmation that they lack the intellectual potential to handle the prescribed coursework.

Kylan's comments about the exposure to resources that could assist with college transitions created a bridge leading to a discussion about the critical need for schools to serve as an access point of information for students of color in disadvantaged neighborhoods. Hinton (2008) proposes that in order for disadvantaged students to have any chance of being successful, schools must embrace their pivotal role of becoming school-based advocates. Hinton further articulates that, as school-based advocates, teachers and staff must acknowledge the fact that people of color from restricted areas have limited access to information and resources and that their role as advocates serves a vital function. Hinton further suggests that, "for African-

American students living in disadvantaged communities, social ties with school-based advocates are necessary for students to realize their aspirations” (p. 133). Kylan’s reflections of his transition meetings suggested positive sentiments are evidenced in his experiences. Weissman and Bilakowski (1998) argue that differences exist in the transition process from school to community colleges when comparing Black to White students. Weissman and Bilakowski further maintain the differences that exist in the transition process result from African-American students feeling devalued in the school system. Research has suggested that differences exist based on racial membership, and any true efforts aimed at increasing post-secondary outcomes for African-American students must include examination of the impact of race.

#### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

A common characteristic identified by both Kylan and Junior was their ability to surround themselves with supportive people. Like Junior, Kylan attributes his success to the choices he made in surrounding himself with positive people who share his passion and desire for education. Briggs et al. (2012) posit that youth in high-risk communities encounter many influencers and influences as they journey to adulthood. Briggs further asserts that urban “African-American youth with exposure to role models report less engagement in violence, aggressive behaviors, and fewer internalizing behaviors such as anxiety and depression” (p. 207). In concert with assertions conveyed by Briggs, Clark, Dogan, and Akbar (2003) contend that protective networks of positive peer influences deter youth from problematic behaviors. As Kylan maintained a network of positive role models and friends, he increased ability to meet with positive social and academic outcomes.

A critical factor to note in Kylan’s interviews is the importance he placed upon being future focused as an attribute leading to his success. In Kylan’s opinion, being future focused simply means keeping tomorrow in mind rather than just thinking about today. Kylan attributes

being future focused to being successful because he feels that so many people give up when they face difficult problems due to their failure to understand that better days will come. Cunningham, Corprew, and Becker (2009) postulate that being focused on the future by maintaining expectations is a rarely studied phenomenon among high performing African students. Cunningham et al. further suggest that “adolescents create and develop images of their future self and accompanying expectations from various sources, such as teachers, parents, and peers” (p. 281).

Kylan provided the following reflective thoughts about the role of constructive influences in ensuring his success and his ability to remain future focused:

So education is something very important to me, so I surround myself around people who have a burning desire for education, not only for education but a burning desire to educate others as well. The people you socialize with, make sure those people are individuals who matter to you and what you’re trying to do in the future not just today. Definitely make sure they are future focused people and they have a desire for what you are trying to accomplish. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

A consistent theme communicated by Kylan and Junior is the need for individuals to be self-motivated and have the drive to win in spite of the odds stacked against them. As Kylan further communicated, no matter how great the challenges may seem, successful individuals must to have the inner drive to seek out the resources to help them overcome the challenges. Kylan’s spoke at length about the need to be self-motivated in efforts to seek out resources to ensure success. Kylan expressed that he would like to encourage future students encountering some of the same challenges that he has overcome to actively become engaged in being self-educated. Emphatically spoken, Kylan suggested that reading and seeking out knowledge resources forces other people to take them seriously. As articulated in research identifying

factors that lead to successful post-secondary outcomes for disabled students, self-advocacy is a critical skill that disabled students must understand and fully demonstrate (Deshler & Schumaker, 2006; Getzel & Thoma, 2008). In Kylan's efforts to embrace the importance of being self-educated, he demonstrated elements of self-advocacy.

The role of mentors and mentorship surfaced in reflections of Kylan's and Junior's educational experience. As stated in research highlighting mentorship efforts with Black youth, mentorship programs may exist in many forms involving various activities (Brown, 2009). Junior was exposed to mentorship opportunities through teachers and fictive kinships that existed within his family structure. Kylan's exposure to mentorship programs was via community-based organizations and through relationships that were fostered with various elected officials in his community. Though the design and implementation of mentorship program varied, Kylan and Junior both benefitted from the influences of contact with supportive, caring adults that assisted in their social and emotional development (Woodland, 2008).

Kylan has demonstrated resilience in his ability to rise above risk factors often associated with being an African-American youth living in urban communities by being selective with his group affiliation (Grant & Dieker, 2011; Woodland, 2008; Zimmerman et al., 2004). Kylan's decisions about the importance of associating with positive peers and role models have contributed to his success and promoted resilience. Kylan has also demonstrated resilience in his role of advocating for himself in seeking out resources and supports to help enhance his academic experiences. Through relationships established with mentors, Kylan has demonstrated resilience on multiple levels. Resilience is evident in his ability to develop and sustain healthy relationships with role models, mentors, elected officials, and community programs. Research suggests that many ethnic minorities choose to not participate in youth programs in the community (Perkins et al., 2007). Kylan has not only participated in youth programs, he has

established his own community-based program.

### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

Similar to Junior, Kylan realizes that a college degree will help him reach his career goals. Educationally, he would like to obtain a bachelor's degree in justice and then pursue a master's degree in public administration. In terms of career goals, Kylan has several aspirations. He would like to start his own consulting firm while working in the nonprofit sector with a degree in public relations. He has been very involved in his community through his past participation in two local elections for village trustee and through his nonprofit youth organization. Civic engagement similar to Kylan's level of participation is documented in research that speaks to Black youth activism in Black youth community organizations. Ginwright (2007) argues much of the discussion regarding Black youth has been focused on understanding the causes of failure and problem behaviors such as violence and school failure. Ginwright postulates that while these are important, the narrow focus on problems obscures the complex ways in which Black youth respond, challenge, and change conditions in their schools and communities.

Dramatic educational, economic, political, and cultural transformations in urban America coupled with decades of unmitigated violence have shaped both the constraints and opportunities for activism among Black youth. Intensified oppression in urban communities has threatened the kind of community spaces that foster revolutionary hope and radical imaginations for African-American youth. (p. 78)

Kylan's efforts to remain civically engaged in hopes of ultimately securing a political seat in his community is important based on his desire to impact the lives of disadvantaged youth. Goals of becoming an entrepreneur are revealed in both Kylan's and Junior's interviews. A common thread established among both of them is their desire to uplift and help individuals

through empowering them with knowledge and support. Kylan's youth organization as serves as a foundation for teaching Black children the importance of fictive kinship by providing networks of adults to support educational emotional needs in their own community. Ogbu and Fordham (1986) proposes that "when Black children learn the meaning of fictive kinship at an early age, they tend to associate their life chances and success potential with those peers and members of the community, sometimes more, sometimes less but always strongly" (p. 196).

Kylan's educational goals and career aspirations display elements of resiliency. He has overcome adversities associated with being educated in separate, substandard educational classrooms and is actively pursuing a college degree. Kylan has not let his educational goals be defined by special education labels that stigmatize him with words such as *mildly mentally impaired*, *intellectually delayed*, or *learning disabled*; such labels symbolize unfavorable post-school outcomes for many Black males. In addition to being educationally resilient, Kylan has demonstrated resilience in embracing community restraints that exist as motivating factors to bring about change in the lives of young people. As a recipient of the cultural and educational benefits afforded through membership in fictive kinships, Kylan is channeling these experiences into his youth organization.

### **Theme 7: Voice from a Black Perspective**

An analysis of Kylan's interviews suggests some opinions similar to Junior; the voices of Black males need to be heard. When asked what led to his decision to participate in the study, Kylan said that he felt like his participation would be a great way to communicate as successfully as possible from a student perspective. From the perspective of a student, he shared that success for African-American males rests upon the effectiveness of a holistic approach that examines a multitude of factors impacting success, factors that are not just limited to the classroom setting. As the interview went further, I asked Kylan to expound more upon the perspective that he felt

needed to be heard:

So many times we look at issues and we try to address one particular problem or kind of put a bandage on one scrape. But I think there are many marks or scrapes that must be addressed when it relates to African-American students because they are coming in with so many different problems so it's really hard for you to focus on your academics if you are struggling with housing issues or you don't have a place to live. And it's really hard to focus on academics when you can barely get back and forth to school or you are thinking about what you are going to eat when you get home because there may not be any food in the refrigerator. (personal communication, December 1, 2012)

Kylan's final thought speaks volumes about his awareness of the plight of African-American males. Kylan believes Black males exist within a multitude of factors that impact their ability to meet with success in the academic setting and in their life choices outside of the school setting. Kylan's perspective lends credence to the challenges that Black males face that are associated with the intersectionality of race, class, and gender (Harper, Terry, & Twiggs, 2009). In terms of race, Black males are consistently positioned to inherit the generational scars of racism that have plagued this country for years (Kaefele, 2009). As much of the research speaks to the economic constraints associated with living in poverty, research suggests that African Americans are prone to live in poverty-stricken conditions more than any other ethnic group of people in this country due to the removal of job opportunities that have occurred as a result of White flight from many urban areas (Parker & Maggard, 2009). The issues of poverty become very evident in Kylan's reflections on issues that affect Black males. As he asserts, struggling through issues of basic necessities, such as food and transportation to and from school, serve as obstacles for many Black males.

The final portion of intersectionality that results in adverse conditions for African-

American males is the issue of gender. Though racism has been embedded into the fabric of this country for centuries, Black males, by virtue of their gender, experience the most deadly effects of racism. Howard (2012) postulates that they are the most hated yet emulated members of society. Orelus (2012) suggests that “stereotypes of Black males as thieves and drug dealers have become a part of the nation’s consciousness” (p. 3). As Kylan alluded to, there are many issues that cannot be viewed in isolation when addressing the needs of Black males. In order for African-American males to meet with success in their academic endeavors, critical attention must be given to multitude of conditions in which they exist.

## **Bernard**

### **Introducing Bernard**

In the midst of the pressures that make having a baby out of wedlock something to celebrate, Bernard emerges with traditional family values that many believe to not exist. Bernard doesn’t have it “twisted”; he is bringing old school when “family” meant being a part of a cohesive unit. (Dixon, 2013)

Bernard is an 18-year-old African-American male currently attending Roosevelt Moore College. In interacting with Bernard, I found he presents himself as very soft spoken and mild mannered. Bernard is the middle child of three children. He currently resides with his parents in a suburb located 10 minutes west of Chicago. Bernard’s parents are both military veterans, and his family structure includes a very tight bond with his grandparents, who reside close to his home. Bernard describes his parents as hard-working people. The importance of establishing a good work ethic has been passed down to Bernard. In addition to being a full-time student, Bernard has a part-time job that requires him to work the third shift. After working his scheduled hours that extend into the early morning hours, Bernard attends class.



Educationally, Bernard views Roosevelt Moore College as an opportunity for him to stay on top and never fail. Ultimately, Bernard envisions himself being employed as a certified automotive mechanic. It is interesting to note that Bernard's father is also a mechanic and has spent a great deal of time sharing his love for cars with Bernard. A hobby that Bernard shares with his father is buying cars that need to be repaired and completing all of the work needed themselves. In addition to using the cars themselves, they also help family members with their transportation needs.

As a newly enrolled college student, Bernard's experiences turned out to be somewhat different from Junior's and Kylan's. Bernard has not had many of the same educational and social experiences as Junior and Kylan. Much of that can be attributed to their age difference and years in the college setting. In comparison to Junior and Kylan, Bernard appears to have lived a very sheltered lifestyle, a great deal of his socialization and lived experiences being obtained within the structures of his close family. Like Junior, the expectation to attend college has been evidenced by many members of his family. Bernard's mother has some college experience, as well as several of his aunts. Bernard's sister currently attends a college in Missouri. Unlike Junior and Kylan, Bernard did not provide a great deal of depth about school relationships established with peers or teachers throughout his educational experiences. But similar to Junior and Kylan, Bernard was diagnosed with a learning disability in the same elementary school district.

Together with Junior and Kylan, Bernard represents everything spoken and unspoken about Black males. A litany of research identifies Black males as delinquent, uneducable, and violent (Davis, 2005; Howard, 2012; Tapia, 2011; Wilkinson, Beaty, & Larry, 2009). Scant in the research are the experiences of young Black males who have graduated from high school and are in pursuit of a college degree. In addition to gaps that exist in reporting the experiences of

these young men, a gap also exists in examining the role of their fathers in guiding them through critical transitions in their lives. Existing literature on the role of the father in African-American families often positions them as absent members of the family whose absence contributes to negative outcomes for Black males (Reynolds, 2009; Thomas, Krampe & Newton, 2008). As an absent voice in the literature, Bernard's voice will now be heard as an African-American male college student raised in a traditional two-family middle class home.

### **Theme 1: Defying Racial Stereotypes and Generational Scars**

Bernard's life speaks volumes about the plight of African-American males in this country. Bernard has defied statistics conveying the high rates of incarceration and low rates of graduation that have plagued so many other Black males (Alexander, 2012; Kunjufu, 2005; Lewis & Erskine, 2008). Similar to Junior and Kylan, Bernard's enrollment in a community college does not negate the fact that he must also bear the scars of racism and discrimination that generations of Black men before him have endured. Based on the complexion of his skin, Bernard will inherit acts of aggression and racism that he will have to rise above throughout his adult life (Parker & Lynn, 2002).

Though his experiences with acknowledging and rising above acts of racism have been limited in comparison to Junior and Kylan, Bernard's interviews did reveal that he is aware that stereotypes about Black males do exist. In Bernard's opinion, "Black males are perceived to just live in a Black hole." When asked to provide a little more detail regarding this perspective, Bernard shared that this "Black hole" is like they just have nothing in life. Bernard further shared that for Black males, the perception is that if you do not go to college, you will just sit around long enough to get in trouble, fight, go to jail, or wind up dead. Bernard's opinion is aligned to a plethora of research that states that Black males are at a high risk for incarceration and are highly prone to acts of homicide. When asked to provide his opinion about the prevalence of stereotypes

that surround Black males, Bernard provided the following statement: “You have to be aware of what’s being said or what’s being told to the young Black males because you can’t believe everything that other people will be saying about them (personal communication, December 8, 2012).

Bernard’s statement regarding the prevalence of stereotypes about African-American males provided an entry point to explore real-life scenarios of Black males that are often omitted to ensure elements of despair remain constant. Like Kylan, Bernard did not provide thick descriptions of his encounters with racism; however, his real-life scenarios provided a space to explore racist stereotypes that exist regarding the lived experiences of Black males as they transition into adulthood. By his own acknowledgment, Bernard resides in a home that is male-dominated and consists of his father serving as role model and providing stable means of financial support. In Bernard’s description of his home, he identified his parents as “hard-working” individuals. As evidenced in his ability to maintain employment outside of the home, the importance of establishing a good work ethic is a constant expectation in his home.

Bernard’s life scenario contradicts research that perpetuates stereotypical negative images of African-American families. Purely by his racial membership, the dominant culture views Bernard as the product of a dysfunctional home. Historically, Black families have been presented in the literature as problematic and unable to secure productive outcomes for their children. Thomas, Krampe, and Newton (2008) postulate that in recent past, African-American families have been depicted as families in crisis. “Their families are frequently regarded as poor, fatherless, dependent on government assistance, and involved in producing many children out of wedlock” (p. 529). Thomas et. al. further maintain that, historically, Black fathers are presented as invisible and unstable members of the family unit. Bernard’s life scenario does not sound like that of someone who is fatherless, poor, dependent on government assistance, or in crisis.

Regarding the prevalence of research that embraces racially driven stereotypical beliefs about Black families Reynolds (2009) articulates the following statement: “Black fathers are traditionally constructed as absent from parenting and unwilling to take responsibility for their children, with the result that researchers know little about their parenting practices (p. 12).”

Given its endemic nature, the issue of race cannot be separated from any experiences of African-American males (Abrom & Moi, 2009; Malagon et al., 2009). Reynolds (2009) argues that race and racial practices must be acknowledged when exploring the ways in which Black men engage in fathering activities. Reynolds further argues that the historical premise of Black men being portrayed as absent was the result of racially driven slave trades. Reynolds expounds on these beliefs by providing the following explanations:

The notion of absence is reinforced in various ways. First, Black male marginality is constructed as culturally embedded behavior linked to African cultural heritage and slavery in the Caribbean and United States. Historically separating families in association with slavery, based upon the men [being] forced to live apart from their families as of result of the slave trades. Female headed households from slavery and still exist today. (p. 16-17)

As a member of the African-American race, Bernard is not exempt from the stereotypes and acts of racism and oppression that exist today. As Bernard continues to mature as an adult, he will ultimately have to contend with multitudes of situations that will heighten his association with what theorists have defined as the stereotype threat. Davis et. al. (2006) define the stereotype threat as the fear of confirming a negative stereotype about one’s group. For Bernard, he will need to reflect on his upbringing in a two-parent home, in which his father did not have children out of wedlock and financially contributes to the needs of his home.

Parallel to Junior’s and Kylan’s experience, Bernard has not disclosed to the college that

he has a disability. When asked if he took advantage of any services the school provided, Bernard stated that he does all of his homework before he leaves the campus each day. Bernard's refusal to disclose his disability status is consistent with research that suggests that although more and more students with disabilities are attending post-secondary institution, they still do not access services provided for them to enhance their college experience (Hartman & Haaga, 2002; Hayun & Hamil, 2003). During conversations with Bernard about Roosevelt Moore College, he stated that he didn't really like the school and if given the option, he would not continue on there. It can be speculated that Bernard did not seek assistance from the school because he had not bought into what the school promised to offer.

As a college student, Bernard demonstrates resilience on many different levels. Educationally, he has defied statistics that position him as a high school drop-out rather than a college student (NCES, 2011). Despite being labeled as an individual with a learning disability, he did not let the label inhibit his determination to graduate from high school. From the perspective of his family structure, Bernard has demonstrated resilience in that his life. Being raised in a two-parent, male-dominated home defies stereotypes that position African-American males as the offspring of dysfunctional homes absent of their fathers (Reynolds, 2009; Thomas, 2008). Bernard's life choices also demonstrate elements of resilience. Though research suggests that Black males are victimized by efforts of law enforcement initiatives with the intended purpose to ensure mass incarceration, Bernard has not been involved in any criminal activities (Alexander, 2012).

## **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Consistent with the expectations established in Junior's home, attending college is a common expectation within Bernard's home. Bernard's mother has some years of college. Bernard's sister is currently completing a bachelor's degree at a college in Missouri. In addition

to his immediate family, Bernard has several aunts who attended college. Bernard's college enrollment is consistent with research that suggests that Black families play a critical role in fostering learning capacity and influence decisions to attend college (Herndon & Hirt, 2004). Herndon and Hirt further suggest that "on the whole, African Americans value education. Earning a good education is viewed as a port to economic security and family stability among members of the Black community" (p. 494).

Though Black families have historically valued education and the potential it possesses, the reality is that African Americans continue to be underrepresented in institutions of higher education. As dismal as the outcomes may be for African-Americans in general, statistics regarding enrollment figures for Black reveal even more devastating realities. Palmer (2012) asserts that "Black males account for 4.3% of the total enrollment in 4-year institutions, reflecting the same rates since 1976 "(p. 1). Despite statistics indicating that Black males have made no improvement in their college enrollment efforts in over 30 years, Bernard has not let these discouraging numbers deter his ambitions. In the same vein as Junior and Kylan, Bernard has demonstrated resilience in his ability to pursue a college degree, despite challenges associated with his learning disability (Morales, 2008).

### **Theme 3: Teacher and Family Relationships**

During the portions of the interviews that focused on describing relationships established in the K-12 setting, Bernard's recollection of his school experiences revealed he did not foster substantial relationships with peers or former teachers. Bernard's tone did not reflect any levels of enthusiasm about this when reflecting upon his school experiences. Unlike Junior and Kylan, Bernard's interviews did not convey thick descriptions about teachers who encouraged or inspired the most, nor did he refer to the importance of establishing and maintaining academically and socially productive peers. Deeply embedded within Junior's and Kylan's

experiences were heartfelt gratitude and strong ties to former teachers that extended into their adulthood. Given the fact that Bernard did not provide descriptions as to why he did not foster relationships, I had to rely heavily upon the research related to African-American student disengagement to identify possible factors that led to Bernard's disengagement in the school setting.

Research efforts examining factors that lead to the disengagement of African-American males in the education setting suggest that internal factors such as self-esteem concept and identity issues contribute to levels of disengagement (Tatum, 2006). Tatum further postulates that "external factors such as structural racism, community patterns, and parent's education are critical factors to examine" (p. 44). Though there may be an infinite amount of factors that contribute to poor educational outcomes for African-American students, research also positions teacher and student relationships as a critical area to examine in an effort to improve academic achievement (Lynn et al., 2010). Unfortunately, for Black males in urban school settings, the inequitable distribution of qualified teachers and the prevalence of White teachers who lack an understanding of their cultural needs equate to a detrimental school experiences of teacher quality and student outcomes. As Black males are consistently exposed to these substandard educational practices, they often disengage from the educational setting. In addition, as Black males disengage from a curriculum that does not reflect their cultural needs, they solidify their placement in special education (Kunjufu, 2005). Balfanz, Herzog, and MacIver (2002) define educational disengagement as a "process of detaching from school, disconnecting from its norms and expectations, reducing effort and involvement from school, withdrawing from a commitment to school" (p. 224).

Many researchers have argued that the process of disengagement for African-American males begins in the fourth grade (Murrell, 2002; Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003;

White, 2009). As reflected on by Bernard, he was identified with a learning disability in fourth grade. Literature exploring the educational experiences of African-American males suggests that they begin their early school experiences eager and ready to learn; however, optimism and level of engagement declines by fourth grade (Davis, 2004; Kunjufu, 1995). Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003) assert that “a decline in scholastic achievement for Black males begins in second grade, is reinforced by academic tracking and negative stereotyping by influential adults, and can become fully entrenched by fourth grade” (p. 617). Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer further maintain that when African-American males do not view the educational environment as a place to their individual goals and academic success, they choose to disengage from the school setting. Consistent with what the literature states about African-American males feeling a sense of excitement as they enter school, Bernard provided sentiments that suggest he was an eager learner in kindergarten and felt a sense of kinship with his classmates and the school setting:

When I first started school, which is kindergarten, it was a whole new experience for me to know a whole different people because as when I get to different grades, higher and higher, we pretty much knew everybody at school. You know we were just one big family up at elementary school. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

As the research study provided an opportunity for Bernard to share what he felt to be one of his best experiences in grades K-12, he provided the following reflections: “The best time I had. . . the best time I had, there were two. The best time I had was gym and Field Day. Those were the best times I had in elementary school (personal communication, December 8, 2012).

I prompted Bernard to provide more information about his school experiences by acknowledging his comment on gym and Field Day, and asking for more information:

**Interviewer:** Okay so you have told me about, like, gym and Field Day being a



good experience. Any other experience you want to relay in terms of any academic experience?

**Bernard:** I don't have one.

Bernard's experience is one that is all too common in the educational experiences of African-American males. Further exploration of the concept of the disengagement of Black males in the educational setting highlights critical areas for schools to address in any true efforts to improve the educational achievement of African-American males. Bernard's omission of providing information about one influential teacher or school professional in his educational experience gives credence to research that suggests that one factor that influences the underachievement in Black males in suburbia is the lack of caring teachers (Lynn et al., 2002). A litany of scholars argue that the lack of culturally responsive instructional practices that engage students through incorporating the richness of their heritage accounts for disproportionate numbers of African-American students to disengage themselves from a curriculum developed and implemented with European values (Ladson-Billings, 2006; Ogbu, 1987; Perry, Steele, & Hillard, 2003; White, 2009). An additional area to explore is that Bernard's interviews omitted any discussions about his involvement in school activities during his K-12 experience. Bernard did acknowledge that he was active in ROTC<sup>7</sup> in high school. As evidenced in Bernard's interviews, his school experience was much different from Junior and Kylan in that Bernard does not display any connections or allegiance to his former teachers or classmates.

In addition to Bernard's school experience being much different from Junior's and Kylan's, differences are found within the structure of their families. Unlike Junior and Kylan,

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<sup>7</sup> Founded in 1926, ROTC stands for Reserve Officer Training Corps. It's a college program offered at more than 1,000 colleges and universities across the United States that prepares young adults to become officers in the U.S. military. In exchange for a paid college education and a guaranteed post-college career, cadets commit to serve in the military after graduation. Each service branch has its own take on ROTC. Source: [www.Todaysmilitary.com](http://www.Todaysmilitary.com).

Bernard was not raised in a single-parent, female-dominated home. The relationships that Bernard has had the opportunity to foster with his father from childhood through adulthood create a space to explore the impact of these relationships in correlation to his educational aspirations. Research conducted by Parker and Maggard (2009) identifies Bernard's family as a decent family and his dad as a decent dad. Parker and Maggard further expound upon this concept by providing the following definitions:

Decent families have hope for the "future." This hope means that decent families place emphasis on saving money working hard, and raising children in an effort to make something of themselves. Decent dads are described as older African-American males with distinguished characteristics—steady employment, community responsibility, and responsibilities as a husband and a father. (p. 719)

Historically, the father in African-American homes has been portrayed as absent and not contributing to the stability of the home (Reynolds, 2009). Given the attention that has been given to their absence, little is known about the parenting skills and depths of relationships fostered in African-American, male-dominated homes. Coley and Morris (2002) contend that "interest in fathers' roles and behaviors has grown exponentially in the past two decades as changing societal norms and demographics patterns have altered societal views of parental responsibilities" (p. 982). Reynolds (2009) posits that while Black mothers have historically and culturally been celebrated as undertaking dual roles of nurturer and financial provider, attributes such as being nurturing and emotionally there are now being assigned to the roles and responsibilities of fathers. Research conducted by Thomas et al. (2008) exploring African-American family structures that support closeness with fathers suggests that the father's presence is associated with many productive outcomes such as increased self-esteem, academic achievement, stability in peer relationships, and fewer experiences with negative psychosocial

outcomes. In Bernard's experience, relationships with his father have impacted him in such a way that he would live to follow in the same career path in pursuit of becoming a mechanic.

Within the structure of his family, Bernard has demonstrated resilience. Historically, society positions the structure of Black families as a risk factor (Wilson, 1986). Despite historical trends of negative factors being associated with Black families, Bernard's family serves as a source of strength that has allowed him to overcome adverse situations such as living in an urban environment and being educated in an urban substandard school system (Wilson, 1986). With the support of his family, Bernard has demonstrated educational resilience through "maintaining relationships with his parents" (O'Connor, 2002, p. 857). In addition to demonstrating educational resilience through relationships established with his family, Bernard has also demonstrated resilience as a high school graduate currently enrolled in a community college. Bernard's ability to work a part-time job outside of the home and maintain his enrollment in college, conveys resilience through his level of commitment to his education and to his efforts in becoming a self-sufficient adult.

#### **Theme 4: High School Transition Meetings**

A common theme shared by Junior, Kylan, and Bernard was that their high school IEP transition meetings were helpful. In reflecting upon his IEP meetings, Bernard expressed the following:

Well, I think that they helped me a lot because they helped me to keep track of my grades, to see where I'm at, and see where I stand, or what, where I needed hope on at the time, because like one of the subjects I was kind of down the drain with and I needed to focus on that. Then, when my next IEP meeting came up they shot up to an A. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

When asked to provide feedback to his former teachers about his IEP meeting transition process,

Bernard provided the following statements:

Well, I would say, “Thanks for helping me in life.” I got to where I needed to be and now onto the career I really wanted when I left from high school and college. You know, I hope they keep that up for the next, for the next incoming freshman that’s going on to seniors. Hopefully, they’ll do the same. (personal communication, December 8, 2012)

As evidenced in the reflections of Junior and Bernard, absent from the transition process was information about college resources. Though both participants felt that the meetings were helpful, the transition teams did not provide them with resources that would assist with the transition to college. Within the urban school setting that Bernard attends, the access to resources is limited. The lack of the school’s ability to connect Bernard with resources supports research findings from Hinton (2008) that assert that “people of color in restricted areas share restricted access to information and resources” (p. 132). As a result of the school’s failure to connect Bernard with the resources needed to transition to college, Bernard’s source of encouragement and resources came from his parents and networks established within his college-educated family. Jumisko (1998) identifies family support as a key factor leading to success in the college transition process for Black students.

Bernard’s experiences with accessing resources at the community college to assist him with maintaining his grades revealed several similarities and differences. In Junior’s and Kylan’s experience, they both acknowledged that they did not disclose their status of having a disability to college professionals assigned to support students with disabilities. Though they did not disclose their status, they did take advantage of tutoring services. Similar to Junior and Kylan, Bernard chose to conceal his disability status from the college. As suggested with Junior and Kylan, issues of distrust may have led to their decision. In Bernard’s case, it could be argued that

his decision to not seek out assistance from professionals could also be attributed to his lack of engagement in the educational setting. In tandem with Bernard's K-12 experience, the college has failed to capture Bernard's attention and restore the zeal he once had for education in kindergarten. It could be argued that Bernard's creative talents and interests in automobiles have not been highlighted in a manner that has incorporated them into his educational experiences. Swanson, Cunningham, and Spencer (2003) postulate that "for Black males, instances of resilience, success, and competence often go unnoticed and unrecognized, thus denying individuals a sense of success and accomplishment" (p. 610). For Bernard, his college experiences could potentially be more successful for him if he would access resources and support to assist him when needed.

#### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

In contrast to Junior's and Kylan's experience, Bernard attributes all of his success to the guidance from his family. Consistent within Junior's and Bernard's acknowledgment of attributes that led to their success were the influences of the peers, former teachers, and mentors. Bernard's views about what has led to his success are a strong testament to the strength that he derives from his family. Bernard acknowledged that outside of his family, he has not discussed his college ambitions with anyone else. Bernard's decision to attend college has been the direct result of the influence of his family. In a study identifying factors that led to success for Black students in pursuit of a college education, Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggested that Black families establish parameters of standards in the home that affect students' outlook on larger social order and educational attainment. Regarding role of his family in contributing to his success, Bernard passionately provided the following statements:

The only thing you can be successful from is from your parents because they'll point you to that goal in life on what you're trying to become or trying to be,

trying to accomplish that and keep on doing what you want to do and have in your life. (personal communication, December 15, 2012)

Bernard's sentiments about his family confirm that they have contributed to his success.

Bernard had demonstrated resilience in his ability to identify factors that have led to his success. His family has served as a major influence in his life, and he has demonstrated resilience in his ability to maintain healthy relationships with his family. Bernard has also demonstrated resilience in maintaining the values of his family instead of conforming to the values of subcultures that exist around him that could potentially deter him from success (Parker & Maggard, 2009). Bernard has also demonstrated resilience in being able to sustain his enrollment at Roosevelt Moore College without the assistance of any forms of academic support. Despite the challenges associated with his learning disability, Bernard demonstrates educational resilience in his pursuit of a college education.

#### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

In concert with the beliefs of Junior and Kylan, Bernard realizes that a college education will help him achieve his career goals. Bernard's immediate educational goal was to obtain a degree that would certify him to be an automotive mechanic. Consistent with most college freshman, Bernard has not yet identified his long-term educational goals. Sander (2013) suggests college freshman of today perceive college as means of securing employment as opposed to past college students, who attended college to receive an education and appreciated the ideas associated with college. Bernard has identified his ultimate career goals. Bernard would like to open up multiple auto repair shops in his hometown. In tandem with Junior and Kylan, Bernard's future career goals consist of him being an entrepreneur.

Bernard's career goals demonstrate elements of resiliency. At a young age, Bernard has clearly articulated his career path. He has identified that a need exists in his community for more

jobs. Bernard's desire to provide his community with access to more employment demonstrates his understanding of the challenges that exist, while providing some levels of a solution. Parker and Maggard (2009) convey that most urban areas are shaped by neighborhoods that have experienced reduction of manufacturing jobs that have led to proportionate numbers of Black males being unemployed. Like Kylan, Bernard is embracing the community restraints of unemployment as a motivating factor to bring about change.

### **Theme 7: Voice from a Black Perspective**

An analysis of Bernard's interviews suggested that he would like the opportunity for his point of view to be heard. Simply expressed by Bernard: "I'm trying to give my point of view on what I see when I attended two different schools and that's pretty much it. Just to get my point of view on things I see" (personal communication, December 8, 2012).

Bernard's desire to have his point of view about his educational experiences heard adds credence to the fact that the experiences of African-American males from their perspective is absent from the research. Grant and Dieker (2011) assert that "the voices of Black male special education students are seldom heard regarding their perspective of education" (p. 322). Bernard's spoken words confirmed he did not have any positive educational experiences to reflect upon in the K-12 setting. Bernard's experience of not feeling a sense of loyalty or connection to the educational setting is far too common in the lives of Black males. Unspoken yet heard in its silence, Bernard has a multitude of interactions and experiences that have led to his nonengagement in the school setting; further examination of those critical areas could yield improvements in the educational outcomes of African-American males.

## Jeremy

### Theme 1: Defying Racial Stereotypes and Generational Scars

“African-American males are probably the most highly stigmatized group in America” (Swanson, Cunningham, & Spencer, 2003, p. 609). A litany of literature depicts the existence of African-American males from a deficit model; however, literature personifying their triumph and realization of positive outcomes is scarce (Davis, 2005; Noguera, 2008; 2001). Though much of the literature regarding the existence of African-American males is predicated on racist stereotypes that continue to position them as academically inept, prone to violence, and threat to society, Jeremy did not acknowledge any encounters with racism in his K-12 experience or at Roosevelt Moore College. Despite Jeremy’s lack of conscious experiences with racism, literature suggests that racism is endemic in nature and cannot be separated from one’s daily life experiences (Soloranzo, Ceja, & Yosso, 2000). The literature points this out even though Jeremy doesn’t realize it; his enrollment in special education represents that he is a victim of institutionalized racism.

Several scholars have provided historical and contemporary definitions of institutionalized racism. Murji (2007) asserts that the term *institutional racism* emerged in the 1960s social movements. Murji further asserts that “institutional racism accounts for attitudes and practices that led to racist outcomes through unquestioned bureaucratic procedures” (p. 844). Racism in this country has historically been depicted as visual acts of violence or discrimination associated with the Jim Crow Era, such as brutal beatings and cross burnings initiated by White supremacist like the Ku Klux Klan (Orleius, 2012). While physical acts of racism are easily observable, “the manifestations of institutional racism are subtle and observable in patterns of systematic inequality produced by bureaucracies” (Murji, 2007, 845).



Several scholars argue that the existence of special education programs was predicated on racist beliefs that Black students are intellectually inferior; requiring them to be educated in a separate but not equal educational system provides a visual representation of institutionalized racism (Davis, Aronson, & Salinas, 2006; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Townsend & Patton, 2000; Weatherspoon, 2006). Given the nature of separate classrooms for students with special needs, special education sustains the position that separate can equate to being equal.

The historical acceptance of the Jim Crow separate-but-equal doctrine was established as a result of the United States Supreme Court ruling in the *Plessy v. Ferguson* case (1896) that legalized common practices of providing Black students with an unequal public education under substandard conditions (Hunter, 2009). The landmark decision of *Brown v. Board of Education* of 1954 determined that the Jim Crow laws of “separate but equal” were unconstitutional. Though the historic outcome of *Brown v. Board of Education* outlawed educational practices that promoted separate-but-equal educational programs for Black students, many school districts continue to exercise their right to separate students under the realm of special education. In examining the impact of *Brown v. Board of Education* in eradicating the racially driven separate-but-equal doctrine of educating Black students, Orelus (2012) provides the following opinion:

Depending on one’s level of understanding and awareness about the plight of Black and brown people, one might argue that they are better off than they were 50 years ago or so, especially when one remembers the Jim Crow era during which Black and brown people were brutalized particularly by White supremacist groups such as the Ku Klux Klan. However, if one critically analyzed the achievement gap between students of color and their White counterparts, the decline in their income, and other forms of educational and socioeconomic inequality, that Black and brown, particularly poor students of color, have been

experiencing for the last several decades or so would realize that substantially nothing has changed for them. (p. 1)

Expounding upon the belief that special education provides a visual representation of institutional racism, several scholars have articulated their concerns regarding the accepted discriminatory practices that have become a part of the school experience for Black males in this country, experiences that Jeremy has had the misfortune of encountering. Since the inception of special education, Black males have been disproportionately represented in special education classrooms for decades (Harry & Anderson, 1994).

Codrington and Fairchild (2012) argue that “White privilege and racism contribute to and maintain disproportionality in special education through their impact on educational resource allocation (i.e., insufficient funding for school attended primarily by African-American students), culturally inappropriate and unresponsive curricula and pedagogy, and inadequate teacher preparation” (p. 7). Critics of special education programs suggest that cultural and linguistic biases packaged within formalized tests and norms based on experiences of White middle class students contribute to the overrepresentation of African Americans in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005) Research regarding the representation of African-American students in special education purports that Black students represent the highest proportions of students identified as mentally retarded and emotionally disordered when compared to Whites, Hispanics, American Indians, Pacific Islanders, Asian Americans, and Alaskan Natives (Goff, Martin, & Thomas, 2007). In addition to representing the highest percentages of students identified as mentally retarded and disordered, Goff, Martin, and Thomas further assert that “Black students spend more of their school day outside of general education classrooms, which segregates the academic and social skills needed” (p. 134).

As African-American students are stigmatized and excluded from the general education

setting, their ability to compete for scarce educational resources is lessened, which results in second generation discrimination (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). As shared by Jeremy in his interviews, being separated from his peers and being placed in special education resulted in him feeling like he was less than his nondisabled peers. Ferri and Connor (2005) postulate that “segregating students generates a feeling of inferiority as to their status in the community that may affect their hearts and minds in ways very unlikely to undone” (p. 93). Despite decades of advancements in research efforts aimed at addressing the issue of disproportionality that exists in the educational experiences of African-American males like Jeremy, the issue still remains incomplete and imprecise (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Artiles further maintains efforts to eradicate overrepresentation in special education have failed for the following racially driven reasons:

Due to racialization and stratification, the racial group in the position of most power benefits from greater social estimation (e.g., being viewed as smarter or better behaved) economic returns (e.g., higher pay) political positions, occupational prospects, and authority in determining social norms and physical boundaries (i.e., segregation). Further, the intersection of race and disability results in disability serving as a legal justification of segregation. (p. 1530)

As suggested in the literature, special education programs continue to facilitate practices of institutional racism. Despite research depicting special education as a facilitator of racism, past experiences of shame and alienation did not reflect conscious experiences with racism. When asked to express his thoughts about if he felt racism existed in our country today, Jeremy provided the following comments:

I don't agree with that as of now, present, we have a Black president and if that was the case President Obama would not be in the house now as president. So that's one reason I disagree. And another reason why I disagree is because it's all about how you apply yourself and what you want, so I believe if you apply

yourself to the best of your ability, you're able to achieve the goal you want to achieve. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

Though Jeremy has not experienced elements of racism he can reflect upon, he has experienced elements of discrimination from his peers. When examining Jeremy's acknowledgment of feeling ridiculed by his peers, research positions these feelings and experiences of alienation as consistent with feelings associated with being the victim of racism. In describing the elements of microaggressions, Sue et al. (2007) suggest that microaggressions manifest in the form of derogatory verbal comments with the intended purpose to bring about alienation by insulting others. In research describing the negative interactions that occur between disabled and nondisabled peers, Milson and Glanville (2009) articulated that disabled students often express the following:

Feeling disrespected by teachers, revealed that teachers did not notice derogatory comments directed at them by peers without disabilities, and indicated that they did not believe that their teachers cared about them. They also reported feeling "alienation," disinterest, and anxiety regarding their classroom teachers and classmates. (p. 243)

One aspect of Jeremy's interviews that stands out in comparison to the other participants is his acknowledgment that being disabled caused his peers to have negative thoughts about him. Consistent with research conducted by Milson and Glanville (2009) and disabled students, Jeremy has been dealing with disability discrimination. May and Stone (2010) suggest that at the collegiate level, disabled students conceal their disability as a result of fears associated with being discriminated against. Unlike the other participants, Jeremy spoke passionately about the shame associated with being disabled and described the process in which he evolved in understanding that he had the power to not accept his challenges as limitations that would deter his success. In the area of stereotypes, Jeremy spoke in depth about the stereotypes associated

with being placed in special education. Jeremy felt very uncomfortable with being perceived by his peers as being “slow,” which could lead to feelings of insecurity.

Jeremy’s feelings of insecurity manifested in him becoming the class clown in third and fourth grades as a coping strategy to deflect the way others saw his academic difficulties. Although not being diagnosed as having a behavior disorder, Jeremy’s decision to misbehave demonstrates that he internalized the characteristics of behaviors that didn’t previously exist as a result of his special education placement. Codrington and Fairchild (2012) maintain that cultural and linguistically diverse students in special education take on the characteristics of the disabilities that exist in their classrooms; what Jeremy’s feelings of insecurity and threats did to his self concept has been articulated in the research regarding the long-term detrimental impact of special education placements for Black students. Codrington and Fairchild (2012) provide the following opinions about the impact of placing African-American children in special education:

Whether misdiagnosed or appropriately classified as a special education student, the long-term detrimental effects of labeling, stigmatization, lowered expectations, and inadequate instruction, limited access to enrichment opportunities, and spatial segregation can be debilitating. (p. 5)

By fourth grade, Jeremy became active on a community football team. He attributes his participation on the football team as the initial experience that began to help him shape a more positive self-concept that ultimately led to him the person he is today. When Jeremy realized that he played a major role in his team winning championship games, it helped him to cope with the negative thoughts and interactions he experienced from his peers. Jeremy began to think of himself as a winner and utilized these coping strategies as a foundation to begin to defy stereotypes that existed surrounding students with special needs. When reflecting upon the impact of being a part of the football team and its impact in promoting a healthy self-concept,

Jeremy expressed the following:

And in the end, that I was in special ed and continuing all the negative thoughts from my peers, they didn't matter once I was involved in sports because I was in a different setting. I felt like being special ed or not, I'm playing on this team and winning these games and I'm a part of it. And as a kid, that meant a lot to me and it was with me throughout when I went to high school, you know, because I thought being in they might limit you from things you wanted to do. (personal communication, December, 2012)

As Jeremy transitioned to high school, he still continued to have to navigate through the stereotypes associated with being placed in special education, such as his being “slow” and needing to be placed in separate classes. In Jeremy's opinion, he felt that special education was something bad that he wanted to hide from other students. He didn't want the other students to know he had to go to the LD or slow classes. A turning point in developing a stronger self-concept evolved for Jeremy when he had the opportunity to enroll in a course that was not a special education class. Reid and Knight (2006) postulate that special education excludes minority learners from the general education setting and limits their instructional opportunities. Jeremy's access to a general education classroom afforded him the opportunity to help nondisabled classmates. In reflecting upon the impact of having the opportunity to assist nondisabled classmates, Jeremy shared the following perspective:

But I also experienced that I took classes that I was not in special education in those classes. I found myself helping students that in special education and just like feeling that, knowing that I'm helping someone else that does not have a disability, what makes them different from me? I feel that being in special ed wasn't a bad thing. You know and by me helping other students I felt good about myself. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

As early as third grade, Jeremy was aware of the stereotypes associated with being a

disabled student. Documented research examining peer interactions of disabled and nondisabled students, Jeremy experienced feelings of rejection from nondisabled peers (Elksnin & Elksnin, 2004). As Jeremy experienced feelings of rejection, he also developed the social skills necessary to interact with nondisabled peers that proved to be critical in his role of assisting them with instructional tasks. Elksnin and Elksnin (2004) assert that social adjustment is the best predictor of students' attitudes toward school and their academic achievement. Despite the challenges Jeremy experienced early in his educational journey, he emerged from the K-12 setting with a positive self-image. Jeremy's ability to rise above his academic and social emotional struggles demonstrates resilience in that he is not allowing stereotypes about disabled students to define who he is and what he can accomplish on his journey to obtain a college degree.

## **Theme 2: Family Support and College Attendance**

Consistent with Junior's experience, Jeremy indicated that family members were influential in his decision to attend college. Within the structure of African-American households, family plays a critical role in influencing all educational decisions and future aspirations of Black students (Obiakor & Beechum, 2005). Jeremy's mother and brother-in-law greatly influenced his decision to attend Roosevelt Moore College. His mother felt it was best to attend a school close to home instead of going away to school. Jeremy's mother felt that his commuting to school on two busses provided a convenience that would eliminate transportation concerns. Even though his mother was not college educated, she stressed to him the importance of attending college and encouraged him pursue a college degree. Consistent with research that identifies the role of Black families in promoting resiliency, the support Jeremy received from his family has served as a protective factor rather than a risk factor (Lobo, 2008; Wilson, 1986).

Similar to the experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy's neighborhood is plagued by violence, homicide, and drug activity. On a daily basis, Jeremy is exposed to a street

life consisting of individuals who have developed their own culture in response to the stressors of urban living. Jeremy has not adopted the values of street life (Parker & Maggard, 2009).

Parker and Maggard further maintain that “street families conform their lives to the code of the streets, socialize their children to do the same, and become overwhelmed with life’s struggles” (p. 718). Despite the daily exposure to risk factors in the neighborhood, the influence of Jeremy’s family helps to deter him from risk factors that have led to not-so-favorable outcomes for many other Black males. In addition to the support Jeremy received from his family, he views his college attendance as a way to escape the predatory conditions of his environment. Jeremy passionately spoke about the importance of his traveling outside of the neighborhood as a necessary factor in rising above the constraints of the neighborhood:

And there are a lot of people out there that think like that they would never understand that going to school or doing something different from your peers in the neighborhood if they never got the chance or opportunity. But if someone like myself is able to get out and experience something different, I’m able to be a living testimony upon that you can better yourself and there’s opportunities out there than just being around the neighborhood. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

### **Theme 3: Teacher and Family Relationships**

For many African-American males, their K-12 educational experience has not promoted favorable outcomes. Howard (2012) asserts that “Black males as academic failures has become so enmeshed in the educational fabric of schools and school districts that it becomes alarming or inexplicable when Black male success outside of the athletic domain occurs” (p. 63). Black males exist in school districts that disproportionately place them in special education with limited access to enrichment opportunities that ultimately fuel the classroom-to-prison pipeline



(Codrington & Fairchild, 2012). Comparable to the experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy was identified with a learning disability in third grade. Consistent with the other three participants in the study, Jeremy's induction into special education occurred in urban school setting. A noted difference that sets Jeremy's experience apart from the other three participants is the acknowledgment of the shame he felt about being placed in special education and measures he took to conceal his disability as early as third grade.

In tandem with the experiences of Junior and Kylan, Jeremy conveyed that he encountered teachers who really supported him and encouraged him academically. He felt that his high school teachers helped him to understand what it meant to be in special education and to have a learning disability. Jeremy credits his teachers for helping to understand that having a learning disability is not a bad thing. Through Jeremy's interactions with his teachers, he discovered that having a learning disability simply meant that he learned differently, but did not mean he was incapable of learning. His teachers encouraged him to accept help when needed, but they also held high expectations for him. For individuals who do not understand that being in special education does not mean you cannot learn or achieve things, Jeremy provides the following opinion:

I believe that students shy away from wanting to ask for help for, you know, with certain things that they're dealing with within their classes, you know, maybe because of a disability or maybe they feel they'd be made fun of. And I feel that by letting those things get the best of you, you are cheating yourself out of a degree and your education because there are people out there to help you overcome your stumbles you are facing, and you don't just want that to go by.  
(personal communication, December 16, 2012)

Parallel to the experiences of Junior and Kylan, Jeremy attributes his successful school experiences to the activities that he participated in. In high school, Jeremy was very active with the football team and band. The successes he experienced with football in elementary school

remained with him as he continued to evolve into an excellent athlete. Jeremy shared that when he first arrived at his high school, he experienced the same shame he felt in elementary school about others seeing him in separate special education classrooms; however, once he was involved in band and, later on, football he felt good about being in school. Jeremy further expressed that his band teacher told him he was the best trumpet player he taught in the high school. Further highlighting his talents, Jeremy shared that he served as the captain of the football team and twice received the Most Valuable Player Award. Jeremy's participation in school-sponsored activities have contributed to helping him develop a positive self-concept. Hoffman and Xu (2002) provided the following opinion about school activities in promoting favorable school outcomes:

Involvement in school activities promotes bonding to schools through emotional attachment. Moreover, school activities allow adolescents to broaden their social networks, practice their social skills, and learn to communicate effectively. (p. 569)

The interview asked Jeremy to recall a challenge he faced in his school experience, and he reflected upon a time he had to give an oral presentation in a general education English class. In his special education English class he had not been required to present in front of the class. Having no experience with this task, he felt very anxious about his ability to perform up to the teacher's expectation. Jeremy was also very nervous about how his peers were going to perceive him. As he struggled with how he could overcome this obstacle, he went to the Special Needs Office at his school for help. Based upon the relationships he had fostered with teachers, Jeremy felt comfortable seeking out assistance. Flowers et al. (2011) assert that the establishment of quality relationships is critical to sustaining favorable outcomes for African-American students. Jeremy provided a description of the help he was given and its impact on his self-esteem:

I can remember where I was taking an English class my senior year and have to write a paper and stand up in front of the class and speak with them. I felt that's something I never did and me being in special ed I thought that might play a big part upon it, but there was help there and I went to the Special Needs Office one day and told one of the workers about the problem I was having. They sat down with me during my breaks and after school and helped me with that paper. And when it was time present, I felt more confident about myself and I can do this because I applied myself. And so by doing that I felt I basically can do anything I put my mind to it and that being in special education didn't slow me down from accomplishing a goal. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

Comparable to the experiences of Junior and Kylan, Jeremy acknowledged the impact of his extended family in influences his decision to attend college. Jeremy made specific reference to a brother-in-law, who spent a great deal of time speaking with him about his life choices beyond high school. Jeremy's relationship with his brother-in-law provided a space to discuss the impact of fictive kinships and mentors in promoting productive outcomes for African-American males. Several scholars suggest that fictive kinships in which Black students exist greatly impact their ability to perform academically and impact educational pursuits beyond high school (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; Herndon & Hirt; 2004; Ogbu, 2004). In addition to Jeremy's brother-in-law being a part of his fictive kinship, he also serves as a mentor to Jeremy. Du Bois (2011) asserts that close, enduring ties with naturally occurring mentors in the lives of youth have been found to predict outcomes that foster improvement in academic and vocational outcomes (p. 62). Jeremy's voice carried extreme levels of gratitude when he spoke about his level of appreciation for times his brother-in-law would sit down with him daily to talk about how important education was and about the different decisions that adults would be required to make in their everyday lives.

Jeremy had demonstrated resilience in the relationships he established with his family.

Given the fact that he is the product of a single-parent home with limited exposure to college resources, his family's guidance has served as a protective factor instead of a risk factor in pursuit of obtaining a college degree. Despite feelings of shame and doubt that Jeremy has experienced because of being placed in special education, he has demonstrated resiliency in his ability to develop a healthy self-concept and positive self-esteem. His ability to demonstrate resiliency in his self-concept and academic self-esteem have provided him with the tools necessary to overcome the risks associated with the stereotype threat. By overcoming the stereotype threat, Jeremy did not let his academic struggles determine whether he graduated from high school and enrolled in a community college. Thomas, Mark, Smith, and Crosby (2012) propose the following theory regarding the relationship between academic self-esteem and the stereotype threat:

A lack of relationship between academic self-esteem and global self-esteem will occur possibly due to the presentation of the stereotype threat. As a result of the process, academic disengagement occurs whereby students dis-identify with their educational pursuits; instead detaching their educational performance from their self-esteem. (p. 3)

#### **Theme 4: High School Transitional Meetings**

A common theme communicated among all of the participants was that they felt that their IEP meetings were very encouraging. Jeremy recalls getting compliments that said, for instance, that he was a go-getter. Jeremy felt that the complimentary feedback made him feel like he could do anything. By instilling in Jeremy that he was capable of accomplishing anything he set his mind to, he felt the transition to Triton was possible for him. As with the transition meetings for Junior and Bernard, Jeremy's IEP meetings did not discuss the resources that were available to him at the collegiate level. Diehm, Palmer, Lee, and Schrorer (2010) suggest that many of the

poor post-school outcomes are due to gaps that exist in transition planning for students with disabilities.

Unlike the experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy disclosed his status of having a disability to the Office of Access and Accommodation on the campus of Roosevelt Moore College. As a result of his disclosure, he received multiple sources of support from the office, such as extended time to complete tests and assignments and assistance with writing formal papers. Jeremy was also given assistance with his homework and extended time to complete homework assignments, depending upon the complexity of the assignment. Jeremy decided that, in addition to the services offered by the Office of Access and Accommodations, he would access resources available for students with disabilities at the collegiate level, which provided a space to discuss laws established to provide protection for disabled college students.

In response to the needs of individuals with disabilities in our society, Congress enacted the Rehabilitation Act of 1968-1980. As a result of these efforts, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act was developed, ensuring that programs and activities receiving federal funding did not engage in discrimination based on identified handicaps (Kortering, Julnes, & Edgler, 1990). In conjunction with this mandate, the Association for Higher Education and Disability (AHEAD) is responsible for establishing consistent procedures that ensure students with disabilities are provided resources and support services on college campuses across the country (Denhart, 2008).

Like Kylan, Jeremy received services from the TRIO Program. The TRIO Program provided with him financial support for his books and also assisted him with completing his yearly financial aid applications. As a first-generation college student like Kylan, Jeremy had to seek out resources on campus that would address his financial and academic needs to sustain his enrollment at Roosevelt Moore College. Jeremy has demonstrated resilience with his self-

advocacy skills, which led to him to secure the services needed. Additionally, Jeremy has demonstrated resilience in overcoming the fear and stereotypes associated with disclosing his disability status, which have hindered other young Black men from seeking out educational support and services.

### **Theme 5: Attributes Critical to Success**

A commonality found among Junior, Kylan, and Jeremy is the belief that one's inner drive and determination determine how successful they will become in life. Jeremy expressed that because he is a self-driven person, he takes pride in saying that he makes decisions on his own behalf to ensure he remains productive and as independent as possible. During the interview, he described how he shines shoes at the local police station on the weekends to earn money to support himself financially. Jeremy stated that he transfers his ability to overcome his financial challenges into the classroom setting. Jeremy feels that if he is able to overcome obstacles in his environment such as limited financial resources, he can overcome barriers he faces in the classroom.

When asked to share his beliefs about success, Jeremy expressed that success is all about how individuals apply themselves and believe in their abilities to accomplish anything they want to achieve. Conveyed within Jeremy's interviews was the depth to which his teachers helped to develop a positive outlook about himself and the potential he had despite his disability. The importance of sustaining productive relationships with teachers was also identified in the experiences of Junior and Kylan. Jeremy also shared the same perspective as Junior and Kylan about being selective about who one chooses to associate with. A final area of commonality noted in the experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Jeremy was their ability to selectively choose who would be a part of their inner social circle. When asked to elaborate on the impact of being

selective about who he interacts with, Jeremy provided the following comments:

If your are around a negative environment, of course, you have those thoughts, but if you have someone that's there to tell you about the different areas they went through throughout their life or their high school and how they made a change, they can influence you on yours as well. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

Jeremy has demonstrated resiliency in his ability to demonstrate self-awareness of his academic deficiencies, proactively plan for support when needed, and preserve despite challenges he encounters in the educational setting (Konrad et al., 2007). Despite the obstacles he has faced, Jeremy seeks out the necessary resources to ensure he is able to apply himself to the fullest extent possible. He has also demonstrated resilience in his ability to develop a positive self-outlook despite financial barriers he has encountered in his neighborhood that impact his finances. In lieu embracing the street mentality that is consistent with living in an urban area, Jeremy earns his money by making an honest living. Jeremy's work ethics demonstrate resiliency in that he has created a job for himself in the absence of industry in his neighborhood. Jeremy has utilized adversity as a driving force to create opportunities for himself in the area of employment.

#### **Theme 6: Educational and Career Goals**

Like Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy acknowledges a college degree as a necessary tool to achieve his career goals. Jeremy would like to ultimately pursue a bachelor's degree, while maintaining employment as a mechanic. Jeremy's aspirations of pursuing a degree beyond community college is consistent with Junior's and Kylan's educational goals. Excerpts from Junior's and Kylan's interviews consistently reflect that they share Jeremy's desire to pursue his education beyond Roosevelt Moore College:

**Junior:** I plan on being a senior engineer at a firm. And after that I plan on actually owning my own firm for not only Black engineers, but a very diverse workplace.

**Kylan:** I am currently studying general studies at Roosevelt Moore College. And my goal is to transfer over to Nationwide University and gain a degree, a bachelor's degree in justice.

Consistent with research that suggests that community college students have high aspirations despite living complicated lives, Jeremy's persistence in completing his degree speaks to his level of commitment (Hagedon & Maxwell, 2002; Liu et al., 2009) Though research suggests that Jeremy's enrollment in a community college placed him at risk for experiencing the *community college penalty*, which refers to community college students' discouraging matriculation rates to four-year institutions, Jeremy, Junior, and Kylan have successfully completed a two-year degree (Long & Kurlaendar, 2009).

### **Theme 7: Voice from a Black Perspective**

Similar to the perspectives of Junior, Kylan, and Bernard, Jeremy felt that his participation in the study would provide him with an opportunity for his voice to be heard. Jeremy felt that he isn't the only study to experience problems and stumbles throughout college and he won't be the last. He further communicated that by explaining his success he believes he will be able to help someone else. Jeremy firmly believes that every college student should have someone they can go to for help. Jeremy's interviews displayed a strong sense of self-confidence despite adversities. Jeremy provided a critically strong opinion regarding the role of self-determination in overcoming obstacles associated with having a disability. Jeremy's hope is that people will not let labels define their aspirations to attend college:

I am a living testament of it being done because everyone has that little person



inside of them telling them what they cannot do. You know if a lot of students, even myself, have that small voice inside of me telling me what I can and cannot do because I have a disability. And what I felt others might say. But what I would like for them to know is that it can be accomplished because, Jeremy, he's moving forward with his life. He is in college and just because you're in special ed or you have a disability, it doesn't stop here as far as high school. You can go to college and receive a degree and have a career. (personal communication, December 18, 2012)

The element of voice is such a critical component of this research study that highlights the experiences of African-American males that have risen above special educational and environmental obstacles in pursuit of a college degree. Goff, Martin, and Michael (2007) assert that discussions and efforts geared toward identifying the experiences of Black students have excluded the student's voice (p. 144). By providing Jeremy with an opportunity to share his lived experiences, it provides an opportunity to dispel existing stereotypes about Black males. Jeremy's life scenario consists of being educated in a substandard, poverty-stricken school system, which, like many other poorly funded institutions, robbed him of a equitable education resulting in him being placed in special education (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009). Through Jeremy's voice, we are able to experience his evolution in overcoming the odds and becoming a young Black man with a healthy self-concept and positive outlook on life. Jeremy's voice provides us with an opportunity to paint a visual representation of the lived cultural conditions that impact and impede the success of so many other young Black males from female-dominated homes in the inner city and provides us with hope in identifying factors that promote resilience.

## **CHAPTER 6: CONCLUSIONS**

### **Methodology**

Given its ability to incorporate narratives and storytelling, critical race theory (CRT) was selected as the methodology for this research study (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Moreover, through storytelling, CRT provides a medium for persons of color to examine narratives that convey personal experiences of victimization through institutionalized practices of racism (Parker & Lynn, 2002). Through the experiences of the young men participating in this study, readers gain insight into their educational experiences as marginalized members of society. In-depth interviews revealed their academic struggles, as well as their accomplishments. CRT was both a methodology and a theoretical framework for this study because of its ability to examine the impact of race in this society (Abram & Moio, 2009; Malagon, Huber, & Velez, 2009).

In order to capture an accurate account of each participant experience, their stories were presented in mini-chapters. Presenting each participant as a mini-chapter allowed me to thoroughly analyze how each participant experienced the emerging themes. Each mini-chapter was organized to present each theme and provide an account of the participants' experiences and interpretation of the theme. In an effort to support the relevance of each theme, literature that supported each theme was embedded within the chapter. After providing the reader with a discussion and analysis of the themes, each chapter concluded with descriptions that conveyed how the participants demonstrated resilience in their experiences with each theme.

### **Making Meaning of the Stories**

For decades, scholars from psychological, anthropological, and educational fields have attempted to identify reasons African-American males have demonstrated difficulties in learning

and contributing productively to society (Dancy & Brown, 2008). Several scholars have argued that there are cultural conditions associated with being a Black person that serve as a foundation for understanding the complexities surrounding educating African-American males (Brown, 2008; Erskinne & Lewis, 2008; Gabbidon & Patterson, 2006; Noguera, 2008). In an effort to make meaning of the cultural conditions and complexities surrounding educating Black males, research questions were developed that incorporated literature that speaks to plight of Black males. An analysis of participant interviews spoke to the complexities that exist in educating Black males, while providing possible solutions to many of the existing problems that result in unfavorable outcomes for young Black males in urban areas and aiding in understanding the perspectives. In examining the complexities that exist for Black males, Harper, Terry, and Twiggs (2009) contend that the “challenges Black males experience may be associated with race; however, in numerous other cases, there are multiple intersecting factors, such as race (Black), class (poverty), and gender (male)” (p. 216). This study proposed to identify factors that led Black males with past histories of enrollment in special education to successfully transition to community college; the intersectionality of race, class, and gender emerged and were discussed, as they related to plight of African-American males.

## **Junior**

Junior represents everything that is spoken yet unspoken about Black males. Junior was identified for special education for his perceived inability to focus, which led to academic difficulties. Throughout this country, a great deal of discussion and debate has centered on the overrepresentation of Black males in special education (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Kunjufu, 2005; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Unspoken are the stories of young Black males who have demonstrated resilience in overcoming adversities (Noguera, 2008). Unspoken are the stories of

young Black males, like Junior, who have surpassed the oppressions that exist in special education classrooms and have gone on to become members of National Honor Societies.

Junior's educational journey raises questions about the process of mislabeling Black males based upon "culturally biased referral, testing, and placement processes, which perpetuate the ideology that Blacks are innately inferior and chip away at the self-concept of African-American children" (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012, p. 6).

Junior's experience raises questions about the validity of the referral process that resulted in Junior being placed in special education. Junior attended a private high school with limited special education services. A critical question to examine is how Junior graduated from high school with honors, while taking college preparatory courses, with little to no support to address his learning disability. In addition to becoming a member of the National Honor Society in high school, Junior has consistently maintained a place on the Dean's List at Roosevelt Moore College while enrolled in a rigorous engineering program without the support of special services. Junior's academic achievements provide a space to question the possibility of him being misdiagnosed with a learning disability. Junior's stellar academic accomplishments illustrate that being diagnosed with a learning disability does not warrant accepting being defeated in one's academic aspirations.

In addition to providing a space to discuss issues of misidentification and overrepresentation in special education, Junior's experience with racism shows that racism is not a thing of the past. Junior's experiences of being rejected by classmates in his college calculus course exemplify the fact that society's perception of African-American males being intellectually inferior is generational. Despite Junior's academic achievements, his racial affiliation ensures that he will continue to be racialized and deemed ill-prepared for the courses

in which he is enrolled (Abramo & Moio, 2009; Malagon et al., 2009).

## **Kylan**

Like Junior, Kylan's experience represents questions about mislabeling African-American males for special education services. Research suggests that African-American students are disproportionately represented in the categories of mental retardation and learning disabilities (Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Artiles further suggests that categories such as mental retardation, emotional disorder, and learning disabilities are the most subjective areas of identification because they rely on professional judgment in identification as opposed to physical marks or medical diagnoses (p. 527).

Like many other African-American males, Kylan was initially identified as being mentally retarded, reassessed, and found eligible for services under the exceptionality of a learning disability. Kylan's current position of Executive Director of a nonprofit youth organization that he founded raises questions about the validity of the evaluations that suggested he was deficient in his cognition and academic abilities. One must ask how he has emerged as an articulate, well-spoken, and civically active member of his community. Questions for consideration could address how Kylan was able to suppress or navigate his identified deficits in pursuit of completing his degree, while remaining civically active.

In addition to Kylan's experiences raising questions about the validity of the special education referral and identification process, Kylan's experiences provide a powerful message about the role of fictive kinships in promoting constructive outcomes for men of color. Through Kylan's affiliation with school activities and community-based organizations, he developed a network of resources that influenced his decision to pursue a college education. Kylan's story reflects the role that Black youth can play in making a difference in the quality of life in the

community. Ginwright (2006) postulates that youth of today struggle against being caught up in a complex system of control and containment perpetuated by stereotypes and unjust policies. Kylan's interviews suggest that he is aware of the challenges that exist in the lives of African-American students and uses these challenges as a basis to make changes in the lives of young people. Simply put in Kylan's own words, he is fighter who does not let challenges defeat him.

### **Bernard**

Bernard's experience represents hope and despair in the lives of African-American males. Literature depicting the composition of Black families suggests that "children living in lower-income and working-class families are disproportionately more likely to live apart from their fathers than children living in higher income or middle-class families" (Reynolds, 2009, p. 16). In Bernard's home, his transition from childhood into adulthood consisted of him being raised in a "decent" male-dominated family. The structure of Bernard's family defies the stereotype that all Black males are raised in female-dominated dysfunctional homes. Bernard's life-scenario provides a space to highlight an unknown and unexplored area of research that speaks to the role of Black fathers in raising their children. Gordon, Nichter, and Henricksen (2013) suggest that "the role of Black fathers and the lessons they teach their sons receive little attention" (p. 154). Bernard's family structure provides an element of hope for future African-American males because it serves as a model of a cohesive family unit that has also been a protective factor in Bernard's life.

In addition to highlighting a ray of hope in the lives of African-American males, Bernard's disengagement from the school setting also represents the sad educational reality that takes place for many Black males by fourth grade. In seminal work *Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys: Volume III*, Kunjufu (1990) identifies this concept as the Fourth Grade

Syndrome. Kunjufu attributes the disengagement of Black males from the educational setting in fourth grade to the following factors: “(1) a decline in parental involvement; (2) an increase in peer pressure; (3) a decline in nurturance and increase in discipline problems; (4) a decline in teacher expectations; (5) a lack of understanding of learning styles; and (6) a lack of male teachers (p. 29). Though there are many factors that could have potentially led to Bernard’s disengagement from the educational setting, I must pause to discuss the presence of a decline in teacher expectations, a lack of understanding of learning styles, and a lack of male teachers. I feel it is necessary to highlight these three areas because they are directly related to Bernard’s experiences in the school setting. Bernard’s interviews indicated that he didn’t have any positive educational experiences to reflect upon from his K-12 experience. The school district’s failure to provide Bernard with any memorable experiences speaks volumes about the impact of teacher relationships in fostering meaningful educational experiences for students. Bernard’s disengagement from the school setting raises the critical question of what changes need to be made in the education setting to ensure that other Black males do not graduate from high school disappointed with the educational system.

### **Jeremy**

Jeremy’s educational journey represents the stigmatizing effects of placing Black males in special education. The stigma and feelings of inferiority that Jeremy acknowledged he experienced as a result of special education placement show how special education has become a modern tool that continues to advance the agenda of oppression developed and sustained by the dominant culture (Ferri & Connor, 2005; Hunter, 2009). Several scholars have documented the ways special education reinforces the racist practices of segregation by overidentifying Black students for special education services and excluding them from the general education setting by

placing them in separate special education classrooms at alarming rates (Blanchett, Klingner, & Harry, 2009; Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ferri & Connor, 2005; Harry & Anderson, 1994; Kunjufu, 2005; Sullivan & Artiles, 2011). Ferri and Connor (2005) assert that in “addition to tracking, one of the most pernicious means of resisting desegregation has been to overrefer students of color for special education” (p. 96). Though Jeremy did not acknowledge consciously experiencing racism, his placement in a special education classroom reveals racism as alive and well and continuing to affect generations of Black males.

In addition to representing the stigmatizing effects of racism in the school setting, Jeremy’s enrollment in a community college also reflects cause for optimism in the lives of other Black males with disabilities. Despite the discrimination and shame associated with being in special education, Jeremy emerged from his K-12 experience with a healthy self-concept and a spirit determined to pursue his education. Jeremy’s struggle with coming to terms with his disability and overcoming limitations that are often associated with being identified as disabled could potentially serve as a source of inspiration for other African-American males encountering the same educational dilemmas.

### **Research Questions Findings and Interpretation**

The research questions in this study were answered by utilizing a data analysis process that consisted of an overlapping process of sorting and categorizing data through creating initial codes followed by focused codes (Charmaz, 2001; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Initial coding consisted of breaking parts of the transcribed data for each interview into small responses, which were coded using a simple description of the response, serving to highlight relevant interests, literature, perspectives, and commitment (Moghaddam, 2006; Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Next, the data was categorized from these general codes into related concepts. As data emerged from the



questions that was not included in the literature review portion of this research study, additional research was secured to assist with developing the theme. Finally, the information obtained from the research questions was formatted to present the information from each participant as a mini-chapter conveying their responses and excerpts of their literal text. In the next section, the research questions were revisited. In addition to reviewing the research questions, a summary of the findings that were gained through the data analysis portion of this study is included.

**Research Question 1: How did the educational experiences influence the decision of African-American males with a history of special education services to pursue a college degree?**

With the exception of Bernard, the experiences of the participants reflected that their K-12 experience fostered their aspirations of attending college. The participants commented on the positive relationships developed with teachers who provided additional support when needed in their academic coursework. Consistent with research conducted by Dancy and Brown (2008), the academic experiences of Junior, Kylan, and Jeremy in the K-12 setting contributed to their pursuit of a college degree.

**Research Question 2: What role, if any, did family, peers, and environment play in their decision to attend college?**

Junior, Bernard, and Jeremy consistently articulated that the influence of their families played a critical role in their decision to attend college. Herndon and Hirt (2004) suggest that Black families establish the parameters of standards in the home that affect the students' outlook on the larger social order and educational attainment. Junior and Bernard's family influences established attending college as an expectation and not an exception. Although Kylan is a first-generation college student with limited access to resources about college within his family, his

sister's brief enrollment in college did serve as an access point for him in his decision to attend Roosevelt Moore College. Similar to Kylan's experience, Jeremy is also a first-generation college student; however, the consistent influences of a brother-in-law's guidance led to his decision to pursue a college education.

**Research Question 3: What resources were provided for them during their high school transition meetings?**

Consistently communicated by all four participants were their feelings that their transition meetings failed to provide them with resources necessary to transition to college. In lieu of providing the participants with information about resources available to them at the collegiate level (i.e., services provided by the Disabilities Office, tutoring, counseling, and financial aid opportunities), each participant commented that their IEP transition meetings consisted of providing them with information about their grades, academic strengths, and weaknesses. The failure of the high school to appropriately plan for students as they exit from high school via their high school transition meetings supports research findings that suggests the transition process fails to provide African-American males with the resources necessary to promote successful post-school outcomes. One of the greatest challenges facing African-American males in the transition process is the issue of preparation for college (Noeth & Wimberly, 2001; Tatum, 2009). Research suggests that special education students from culturally and linguistically diverse backgrounds have limited access to post-secondary opportunities and are underrepresented in higher education (Oesterich & Knight, 2008).

**Question 4: What resources are available for them in college and how do they incorporate these services into their daily academic practices?**

Out of the four participants included in the study, Jeremy was the only participant who

disclosed his disability status to the college. Jeremy was able to utilize services such as having a tutor help him with his class assignments and with writing his formal papers. In addition to utilizing tutoring services, he was also given extended time when needed to complete his assignments and to take exams. Jeremy's utilization of supports at the collegiate level is identified in the language of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act that ensures that individuals with disabilities are not discriminated against on the sole basis of being identified as disabled and that reasonable accommodations are made within the college setting (Kortering et al., 1990).

In addition to resources that are available for disabled students, Roosevelt Moore College also implements TRIO Programs that support first-generation college students through providing academic and financial support (Arnesto, 1998). Kylan and Jeremy took advantage of these services. Junior accessed tutoring at the college's math lab that was accessible for disabled and nondisabled students. Bernard did not access any of the services available to him at the college.

### **Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study provide teachers with critical information about their role in fostering constructive educational experiences for African-American males that ultimately lead to their aspirations to attend college. This research study also sheds light on the impact of teacher perceptions in their role of identifying who is eligible for special education services. An analysis of the experiences of the participants provides teachers with an awareness of multitudes of factors that often impede the academic success of African-American males, such as environmental factors and the lack of curriculum that supports their cultural needs. The participants identified factors that led to their successful transition to college, and teachers could utilize this information to ensure they are incorporating these practices into their daily interactions with students and into the transition process for students as they exit high school.

Additionally, teachers would benefit from hearing the negative factors associated with participant's school experiences, which could help with their efforts to promote positive experiences for students. This study indicates that student feelings are critical for teachers to become more aware of; negative experiences such as students feeling disconnected or disengaged from the educational setting were widely reported and could have a profound effect on students. Educators should also be more aware of the students' experiences of feeling embarrassed by and ashamed of their placement in special education. Becoming more aware of the lived negative experiences associated with special education would help teachers address these feelings in a manner that promotes a positive self-image instead of subconsciously contributing to students' feelings of shame.

Finally, it is critical to note that school-related activities played a pivotal role in promoting the success of the majority of the young men in this study. The findings of this study could provide administrators with a resource in their discussions about school funding for activities and clubs.

In addition to the benefits teachers will gain from this research study, the data collected from the participants serves as a call to action for administrators who are in a position to make the necessary structural changes to promote more favorable outcomes for Black males. As administrators are establishing policies that promote institutional racism, such as ability tracking, and in-district policies that subliminally support the exclusion of special education students, such as the location of special education classrooms within a building, the information gained from this research study could serve as a basis to make more informed decisions. In terms of the power granted to administrators to determine the professional development needs of staff, the findings of this study suggest that much work is needed to address the multifaceted needs of African-

American males. Additionally, the findings of this study suggest that building administrators would benefit from examining the pre-referral processes that exist in their school that fuel the pipeline to special education. Finally, school administrators could benefit from examining the ways in which Black families utilize their systems of support in school district's efforts to promote more productive collaboration between parents and school.

### **Implications for Research**

The nature of this study greatly impacts the need for future research in protective factors that lead African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education to successfully transition to college. After countless hours of research searches on multiple search engines, I concluded that a study of this nature has not been published in the research. While there were several components of the study that were easily accessible, such as the plight of African-American males, the historical perspectives racism, volumes of research on overrepresentation in special education, and the transition process of disabled individuals, there are no research studies of Black males who experiences all of these components in their pursuit of obtaining a college education. Although I was exasperated by the limited amount of research that existed, I utilized an ecological framework to address these factors. As most of the research about African-American males reports a dismal state of affairs, more research is needed that highlights resiliency and the accomplishments of Black males who have overcome adversities in their journey to college.

In addition exploring protective factors that lead to favorable post-school outcomes for African-American males, further research is needed to examine curriculum that promotes the academic achievement of Black males. Kunjufu (1990) asserts that improvements are needed in the curriculum to ensure that it is multicultural, Afrocentric, and relevant (p. 48). As Black males

continue to achieve less favorable educational outcomes than their White counterparts and are consistently overrepresented in special education, it is clear that the curriculum is not addressing their needs.

### **Strengths**

The strengths of the study included the ability of the researcher to capture the voices of individuals who have historically been voiceless. The design of the study provided readers with thick descriptions that described the experiences of the participants.

### **Limitations**

There were several limitations to this study. The first was small sample size of the study. Although the participants provided very thick descriptions of their experiences, it can be argued that the small sample size does not truly represent the voices of Black males. The stories of the participants can be generalized in that their experiences may resonate with other students who have had similar situations. A limitation exists in the fact that I knew one of the participants when he was in elementary school. If the researcher has knowledge about a participant it can serve as a limitation if the researcher is not certain that he or she does not enter into the research study with preconceived ideas. A final limitation of the study existed in the fact that three out of four of the participants attended the same school district during their K-8 experience. Having participants from different elementary schools would have provided me with more information from a variety of school districts.

### **Recommendations**

As an educator, I chose to work in urban schools because I felt compelled to make an

impact in the lives of those most underserved. Like many educators, I entered the field with a one-sided perspective based on what I had to give to others with no thought that the impact would be reciprocal. Friere (1998) refers to this style of teaching as a “banking” system in which education is “deposited” in a classroom without considering what students bring to the educational setting. As I began to develop research proposals that reflected the purpose of this study, an emphasis was placed upon gaining a better understanding of the experiences of young men that are absent from the research and from media attention that highlights their accomplishments. My desire to learn from these young men was understated as I began this project. Though I have evolved as an educator and understand through my experiences that students have the potential to teach one more than any textbook or course could offer, I engaged in this research process not fully realizing how I would be affected personally and professionally by experiences of these young men. I emerged from this study with many questions answered and many more questions that evolved that could serve as a starting point for future research.

In this recommendation section, I identify several key areas that are greatly impacted by the findings of this study. The recommendations portion of this study will be organized to first address the issue of what makes educating African-American males different from any other group of students in this country. The next portion will provide strategies for families, K-12 school teachers, school administrators, and college officials. The final section will focus on possible ways in which this research study could be presented to school districts as an opportunity to provide professional development to increase the educational achievement of African-American males.

## **Aren't They All the Same?**

### **What Makes African-American Males Different Other Students?**

#### **Cultural Conditions**

Race is a sensitive subject in this country and people often refuse to acknowledge that racism exists. Those who acknowledge that racism is alive and well are often met with opposition from those who continue to believe that Black people use race as an excuse to justify the hardships that exist in their life circumstances. The impact of race and racism and the conditions that result from them is and will always be the white elephant in the room that educators are afraid to acknowledge. It is easier for educators to embrace the idea that Black children perform lower academically than Whites because they always have, instead of acknowledging the historical role of racism that has ensured that Black children are consistently exposed to inferior educational environments. As a result of historically being exposed to an inferior education, Black children have been consistently portrayed in scholarly research as underachievers. Unfortunately, the belief that race does not create differences in educational conditions and life circumstances for people of color in America continues to be refueled as each class of new teachers enters urban schools with false perceptions of the realities of the impact of race and racism in this country.

Consistently stated in the literature is the fact that many pre-service programs do not properly prepare new teachers to successfully teach in urban areas with highly concentrated populations of African-American students (Eckert, 2012). Many newly trained teachers, as well as seasoned ineffective educators, operate from a color-blind perspective that does not acknowledge that race greatly affects educational outcomes for students of color. In order to effectively address the academic and social emotional needs of Black males, it is critical to first



acknowledge that differences exist in the way in which they should be educated. These differences do not negate the fact that they are intelligent students capable of obtaining outstanding educational outcomes; however, these differences provide an understanding of why traditional public schools continue to fail to educate them effectively.

Describing these differences must begin with the issue of race and the manner in which race creates cultural and institutional conditions that Black males must navigate on a daily basis. Black males are members of a society that continues to be plagued by the effects of racism (Jones, 1972; Lewis & Mueller, 2007; Obiakor & Beachum, 2004). Because of their racial membership, Black males must navigate through generations of racism and oppression. More explicitly, African American males exist within a web of stereotypes fueled by racist beliefs that Black males are problematic, uneducable, easily prone to violence, and intellectually inferior (Alexander, 2012; Erskinne & Lewis, 2008; Gibbs, 1998; James, 2012; Mc Gee& Martin, 2011). By racial membership and not by choice, Black males are consistently the victims of verbal and physical acts of racism that are part of their everyday experiences.

Unlike their White counterparts, Black males enter educational environments that mirror the racist practices that exist in society. “All Black youth operate in a paradigm of social concepts that expect the worst of them” (Nicholas, Helms, Jernigan, Sass, Skrzypek, & DeSilva, 2008, p. 262). Obiakor and Beechum (2005) assert that a cultural condition of being a Black man in America means they will doubtless endure wounds to their self-esteem, experience self-doubt, and face stereotypes associated with their race more than people of any other skin color in America. Regardless of their educational aspirations and attainments, Black males exist in a society where they are viewed negatively as lacking the ability to productively contribute to society. Given the prevalence of negative images in the media, Black males are exploited by

commercializing stereotypes that portray them as dysfunctional and depersonalize them as a means to blame them for their experiences (Nicholas, Helms, Jernigan, Sass, Skrzypek, & De Silva, 2008). The impact of negative images perpetrated by the media has created cultural conditions resulting in irrational fears, particularly for Black men (Orleus, 2012). “Given the extent to which Black and Brown people have been misrepresented, it is not surprising that many Whites have mistrusted them. How can one not be afraid of Black and Brown people when they have been portrayed negatively in the media” (Orleus, p. 4, 2012)? Cultural conditions for Black males equate to existing in communities and educational environments that fear their presence.

### **Psychological Factors**

Scholars have documented experiences that have evolved into a theoretical framework described as *Black psychology* (Jones, 1972). Jones asserts that the impact of racism has promoted perceptions of inferiority among Blacks, leading them to internalize feelings of fragility and inadequacy. More recent research affirms the belief that Black males suffer from low self-concepts that prevent them from progressing academically (Laubshcher, 2005; Tatum, 2005). It is critical for educators to understand that historically Black males have been conditioned to believe that they are inferior and unable to excel in the halls of academia. More importantly, educators must realize given this country’s history of limiting the access of education to Blacks, many Black males perceive academic engagement as something for “White folks” and consider engagement to be selling out or acting (Ogbu, 1987). Psychologically, African-American males have checked out of the educational environment due to cultural disconnects and exposure to a curriculum that does not reflect their value system and fails to empower them by highlighting their strengths and accomplishments (Kafele, 2009).

In addition to exhibiting psychological factors such as fragility and inadequacy, Black

males have developed issues of mistrust that make it difficult for them to seek and accept assistance within the academic setting (Lindsey & Marcell, 2012). As a result of being exposed to racist individuals who have not valued or supported their presence in the academic setting, Black males do not trust White teachers and professionals to act on their behalf. This issue of distrust presents a great problem because the majority of teachers and professionals in this country are White and middle-class. Unlike their White counterparts, Black males enter the educational setting with mistrust that serves as a disadvantage to their academic progress. In order for White teachers and other professionals to achieve success with Black males, they must acknowledge the current barriers that paralyze the ability of African-American males to trust and seek assistance.

It is critical that educators acknowledge the existence of psychological factors that may cause African-American males to believe the educational setting does not promote their well-being. Given the history of injustices towards Blacks, many Blacks have been conditioned to believe that any attributes of being Black are associated with negative treatment in this country. Any true efforts to promote the academic, social, and emotional well-being of Black males must embrace the belief that many Black males enter the academic setting with beliefs and feelings of self-hatred. Feelings of self-hatred negatively affect the academic performance of Black males (Charles, 2003; Bell, 2010). Efforts to appropriately educate Black males must acknowledge that Black males are psychologically conditioned to reject their black or brown skin and embrace negative perceptions of their dark skin (Charles, 2003). Educators must create and sustain an educational setting that promotes pride in one's heritage rather than maintaining the status quo, which leads to negative experiences for Black males that foster negative perceptions about their race and identity and lead to the formation of a negative self-concept (Obiakor & Beachum,

2005). Examining self-concept is critical to understanding why African-American males associate themselves in a negative context.

### **Socioeconomic Factors**

Many African-American males in this country are born into a cycle of poverty characterized by disadvantaged socioeconomic conditions that affect their access to a quality education. Steiner and Wooldrige (2009) assert that “due to the overrepresentation of non-whites in economically socially disadvantaged neighborhoods, African-Americans are more likely to adopt values related to an underclass culture” (p. 462). Discussing the depressed economic conditions in which African-Americans exist, Orleus (2012) maintains that persistent inequalities between Whites and people of color constitutes a “new racism” in which Black and Brown people are victims of socioeconomic exploitation predicated upon racially driven beliefs. Orleus further maintains this “new racism has emerged that is more sophisticated than Jim Crow through unemployment rates that have persisted steadily for 50 years” (p. 2). Black males are disproportionately represented in socioeconomically depressed areas, which exposes them to risks associated with living in poverty that affect their ability to progress through the educational pipeline.

Black males residing in socioeconomically disadvantaged neighborhoods must operate in two different worlds, which often becomes problematic in the educational setting. The influences of economically disadvantaged neighborhoods create a culture in which Black males are expected to adopt a “gangster” mentality, engaging in illegal activity to economically survive (Payne, 2006). Payne further asserts that “the systematic blocking of economic and educational opportunities fundamentally challenges the manhood of Black males” (p. 292). Black males within the school setting cannot utilize traits of resiliency they have learned to ensure their

survival on the streets. Black males in the school setting are expected to abandon their “gangster” mentality, which has provided them with a beneficial resiliency in the neighborhood, and condition themselves to become “gentlemen,” displaying respectable and civil behaviors (Payne, 2006).

The low socioeconomic status of Black males greatly affects their ability to access a quality education and achieve positive levels of academic proficiency. Clayton (2011) asserts “one’s individual socioeconomic status, including generational poverty, is important in examining school achievement” (p. 675). Although the issue of poverty is universal and transcends all racial lines, the likelihood of growing up in impoverished conditions is much greater for racial minority children than for White children (Milner, 2013). Milner further claims “poverty is a serious social problem in the United States that has profound influences on students’ experiences in school” (p. 3). Research suggests that more than 60% of Black and Hispanic children attend high schools that are defined as more than 50% poor (Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012). Logan, Minca, and Adar further postulate that “unlike a typical White child, who attends a public school in which most of the children are above the poverty line the typical black or Hispanic child attends a school in which most of the children are below the poverty line” (p. 288).

African-American students are more likely than White students to be educated in impoverished urban schools plagued by limited access to resources and quality teachers. Though the abolishment of Jim Crow Laws required the end of segregation in government and private entities, educational opportunities for students of color are integrated in theory only (Clayton, 2011). Clayton argues “schools that enroll high proportions of students from minority or economically disadvantaged backgrounds suffer from a multitude of factors such as challenges in

recruiting and retaining teachers, high turnover rates, and decreases in fiscal human resources” (p. 673). Socioeconomic status affects Black students more profoundly than their White counterparts. Though “colorblind” individuals choose to believe race does not influence access to a quality education, research contradicts this: when compared to White students, Black students are at a disadvantage in their ability to access the educational pipeline (Clayton, 2011; Logan, Minca, & Adar, 2012; Milner, 2013).

### **School Experiences**

An immeasurable amount of research depicts the academic failure of Black males (Gibbs, 1988; Lewis & Erskine, 2008; Noguera, 2008; Patton, 2005; Tatum, 2005; Weatherspoon, 2006) compared to males of any other race. Black males’ educational attainment has been hampered more than males of any other race because, historically, African-American males have been disproportionately represented in schools plagued by funding inequalities, low teacher expectations, and negative racial experiences (Nicholas, Helms, Jernigan, Sass & Skrzypek, 2008). Black males exist in school systems that reinforce inequitable, racially driven practices that promote educational tracking, biased grading practices, and disproportionate assignment of Black males to special education (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Goff, Martin, & Thomas, 2007; James, 2012; Kunjufu, 2005). Black males exist in educational environments conditioned to fear their presence and refuse to acknowledge the importance of their cultural heritage, which is integral to fostering their academic success (Kunjufu, 2001; Ogbu, 1987; Howard, 2012; Perry, Steele, & Hillard; Tatum, 2005). The educational environment has never been intended to promote Black male achievement or success. For Black males, academic achievement is perceived as an exception rather than an expectation.

## **School-to-Prison Pipeline**

As a result of the social exclusion and marginalization of African Americans, Black males have consistently been overrepresented in prisons for decades (Bennett, 2013). Bennett argues that “historically, the expansion of imprisonment and its disproportionate use against minority groups, particularly Black men, has created a situation where for poor Black men [prison] is woven into the fabric and life course . . . across generations” (p. 133). Several scholars have identified the public school system as a major contributor to ensuring that Black males populate prisons by supporting the school-to-prison pipeline (Codrington & Fairchild, 2012; Ferguson, 2001; Weatherspoon, 2006). Black males being denied critical literacy skills during their K-12 experience contributes to the alarming rates of incarceration for Black males (Winn & Behijadeh, 2011). By sustaining rules and practices such as excessively expelling and suspending Black males, schools play a critical role in preparing Black boys for prison (Ferguson, 2001). Ferguson further suggests “the racial bias in the punishing systems of schools reflects the practices of the criminal justice system at a rate of four times that of White youth” (p. 231). For Black males more than any other race, schools serve as a daily training ground that conditions them to understand and accept the fact that prison will be a natural experience in their transition into adulthood. When examining what makes Black males different from any other male regarding the role of prison in their journey to adulthood, it is critical to note that African-American males from the poorest neighborhoods are subjected to tactics that legalize law enforcement methods resulting in alarming Black males populated prisons and jails on a yearly basis (Alexander, 2012).

## **Strategies for Success: A Multi-Tiered Approach**

### **For Families, Schools, and College Officials**

#### **Families**

The educational experiences that take place during early elementary school and high school shape the aspirations of African-American students to pursue a college education (Dancy & Brown, 2008). The literature clearly articulates that the educational environment in which most Black males are educated is plagued by racially driven practices that consistently convey that the school system is not intended for them. Black parents who support their children in the home and at school must first understand that racism is alive and well, from the most affluent to the poorest school districts in this country. Without first acknowledging the endemic nature of racism in this country, African-American families create vulnerabilities in Black males who are developing a positive self-image. As Black males are exposed to racism in the school setting, parents have the power to mold and shape a positive self-image for these young men (Reynolds, 2010). Reynolds further asserts that “perhaps armed with knowledge of self within a racist world, Black males can then begin to hold educators accountable for their educational malpractice . . . and find success in a system that is not for them” (p. 159).

Efforts to promote more positive outcomes for Black males must begin early in their development by exposing them to positive images of African-American males by utilizing books with little boys and girls that look just like them. Verbal praise must be constant in the household so that Black boys will know what positive verbalizations from adults should sound like. They will learn to expect positive comments in the school setting rather than the negative comments that are often made about their behavior and interactions in the classroom. Genuine verbal praise includes compliments for being handsome, smart, and helpful. Daily verbalizations from family



members that transmit words of encouragement such as “I see you are doing your best” or “I am proud of you” should be common in the home. Genuine comments that encourage young Black boys are free and transcend economic barriers.

As Black males age and continue on their educational paths, there are many ways families can ensure their sons do not disengage from the educational setting. Families can set the tone by establishing the level of communication they expect from teachers and administrators regarding their child’s academic performance. If work schedules prevent consistent visits to the schools to engage in classroom observations and parent-teacher conferences, communication with teachers can be established via email or written notes on a consistent basis, inquiring about the status of their child’s functioning. Parents can sustain enthusiasm for learning by acknowledging their child in the home. Acknowledgment can be achieved by posting a note on the refrigerator commending the student for improving on a spelling test or for receiving a good grade on an assignment or project. Last but certainly not least, Black boys must experience trust in the home when discussing events that take place at school. Given the fact that many Black boys experience maltreatment in the school setting at the hands of individuals who fear their presence or do not believe they are capable of excelling academically, it is critical for African-American males to view their homes as places of safety and support.

As Black males transition out of elementary school and into high school, parents need to continue to support their academic success by maintaining a consistent presence in the schools. This presence may be in person and by building relationships with teachers and staff that will allow for other forms of communication (i.e., phone calls, emails, or postal mail). For many Black families in urban areas, financial resources play a major role in educating students of color. Urban schools and communities often lack the financial resources to provide educational

opportunities for students that would prepare them to compete with their White counterparts. In many urban schools, conversations about college just do not take place. It has become acceptable to believe that African-American students lack the academic skills and financial resources to attend college.

Despite the several challenges that exist for multitudes of Black families from low-income areas, there are ways in which families with limited financial resources can still foster and support college aspirations for their children. Efforts to prepare African-American students for college must begin very early in their educational career.

The next portion of the recommendation section focuses on strategies that can be implemented with high school students. During the student's freshman year of high school, families can begin to research various state colleges in their area via the Internet. Many colleges offer virtual tours. In addition to researching various colleges in their state, families should research four to five historically Black colleges and universities each year as well. While researching each institution, students should keep a notebook indicating points of interest and entrance requirements for each university. Also contained in this notebook should be goal statements for each school year. Students can use this notebook to start to understand that the choices made freshman year will impact their future educational goals. Parents and family members can review this notebook with the student and also generate ways in which they will support their child's educational future as well.

By researching historically Black colleges and universities, African American students will begin to embrace the fact that there are students who look just like them who attend college each year. Historically Black colleges and universities generate a great deal of support from their alumni. Several of these alumni committees have established chapters in many states throughout

the country. Parents could contact the college or university and ask for the alumni committee president in their state or a nearby state. By establishing contact with alumni, parents would have access to resources, scholarships, and upcoming events being held by these organizations.

The issue of Internet access may present an obstacle for many parents in urban areas who lack financial resources. Families could access the information from their local libraries. In many African-American communities and families, the church serves as a place of worship and a source of information about many conditions associated with daily life. Families could reach out to their pastor or officials in their church to utilize computers and Internet access. If families are not actively involved in a church, another alternative would be to reach out to a counselor, teacher, or staff member at the school to assist with process.

For Black males receiving special education services in high school, it is critical to understand the transition services that are afforded to students via their IEP. The most significant fact that parents must understand and demand is that attending college should not be perceived as something that just happens for the “smart” kids. Transition services are required to include information about access and resources for college, as well as vocational programs for students who would prefer to pursue opportunities in that area. In general, individuals with disabilities have experienced poor post-school outcomes due to gaps that exist in transition planning among IEP teams (Diehm, Palmer, Lee, & Schrorer, 2010). African-American students with disabilities are at an even greater risk of not receiving services that would support a successful transition to college because parents are often unaware that these services exist. On average, Black students engage in college planning efforts via resources available at the school 50% less than their white counterparts (Noeth & Wimberly, 2001).

## **College Officials**

Enrollment figures for students with disabilities indicate that 55% of students with disabilities enroll in post-secondary schools, compared to 62% of non-disabled students (NLTS2, 2011). Efforts to improve these percentages are greatly needed. Findings from this study indicate that there are obstacles to gaining access about college resources for first-generation college students from within the nucleus of their families. Some students greatly depend on their community relationships to foster their desire to attend college. Additional findings from this study indicate that a disconnect occurs within the school setting that results in Black males having limited access to college resources. A final finding of this study indicates that for Black males with past histories of receiving special education services, it is difficult to acknowledge their disability and seek out the services community colleges offer. It is important for community colleges to be aware of this information in their efforts to design more effective programs that address the academic and emotional needs of African-American male students.

In an effort to ensure that African-American males in high school special education programs receive more information about the possibilities of attending the local community college, the offices that service students with special needs could form partnerships with the local directors of special education from the feeder schools that attend the community college. The partnerships could consist of discussions of ways to integrate resources at the community college into transition meetings for students or examination of the general needs of students eligible to graduate high school and transition to a community college. The partnerships could also invite representatives from the college to speak to students in class throughout the school year instead of just having local college fairs. As representatives from the community college become more visible in the high school setting, students will begin feel comfortable identifying

individuals they can seek out personally for assistance. At the high school level, brochures and information about the community college should be integrated into all IEP meetings beginning in the student's freshman year. Beginning to introduce the services offered by the community college early in the student's high school career suggests college is an expectation and begins to provide the information students need to attend college. Each year high schools have parent-teacher conference nights on which parents are required to pick up students' report cards. The community college could use this opportunity to have informational tables available with resources from the college.

### **Schools: The Portal to Failure for Black Males**

Countless Black boys enter the educational setting eager and excited to learn. Something happens within the confines of the educational setting that causes eager, actively engaged boys to become disengaged and disconnected from school by the fourth grade. Kunjufu (1990) refers to this process of fourth grade disengagement as one of several factors that point to a conspiracy in the public schools to destroy Black boys. Many would be led to believe that words such as *conspiracy* means that secret meetings are taking place after the school day ends to devise strategies to destroy Black boys. The reality is that the conspiracy takes place during school hours in plain sight of teachers, administrators, and parents. In my experience working in urban public schools, the conspiracy to destroy Black boys is a collective effort of individuals given the charge to educate them.

Those engaged in the conspiracy to destroy Black boys are not hiding behind the white sheets of the Ku Klux Klan and are not fueled by legislation that legalizes the mistreatment of Blacks. The lead conspirators are those teachers who do not realize the impact of establishing and sustaining healthy relationships with students that clearly articulates that they are important

and respected members of the class. These are teachers who do not show a genuine interest in their Black male students. They treat interactions with Black male students as opportunities to discipline. Teachers who lead the charge in destroying Black boys are teachers who operate from a deficit model mindset and allow these beliefs to justify their need to lower their expectations for students. Lead conspirators cannot envision their student's lives beyond the socioeconomic conditions in which they currently exist. Conspirators are teachers who use phrases such as "these" kids versus "my kids or my students." Lead conspirators take advantage of every opportunity to blame the child or the parent for difficulties the child may experience throughout the day. In my experience, lead conspirators are often the most influential teachers in the building and have the potential to lead the staff in a productive manner if a shift in mindset were to occur.

Strategies to eliminate the detrimental effects of the conspiracy can be minimized by teachers who realize the importance of human resources over financial resources in building strong relationships with students. Regardless of the financial constraints of any district, teachers have the power to individually make a difference in the lives of students. Milner (2007) suggests that teachers who have been successful with African-American males in urban schools speak possibility instead of destruction into the lives of their students by "empowering African-American males to envision life beyond their current situation" (p. 241). In addition to speaking possibility into the lives of students, Milner further asserts, successful teachers create classroom environments in which students and teachers care about each other and freely demonstrate their level of care.

The work of failing Black boys in the educational setting consists of organized efforts beyond the scope of the responsibilities delegated to teachers. Superintendents, school boards,

and administrators equally contribute to the devastation of Black males. Superintendents are given the charge by the school board to serve as the instructional leaders of the district. As the instructional leader, the superintendent makes the final decisions regarding curriculum and its implementation. Given the fact that the curriculum has failed to address the needs of Black males for decades, one could argue that most superintendents are unaware of the cultural needs of African-American males; enabling Black males to successfully access and gain academic proficiency with most standard curriculums requires their needs be understood. Though the superintendent is the instructional leader, he or she does not act alone in his or her efforts. School districts hire Directors of Curriculum and Teaching and Learning to ensure the curriculum is rigorous in its content and meets the needs of students.

Despite the best efforts of those responsible for the implementation of curriculum, individuals possessing the most education and skills have failed to produce favorable outcomes for African-American males. Co-conspirators in this endeavor to destroy Black boys are members of district-level textbook selection and curriculum alignment teams, who refuse to acknowledge that they continuously select textbooks and curriculum materials that do not reflect the population of students they serve. Though each conspirator shares an equal responsibility in destroying Black boys, it could be easily argued that the teacher delivering culturally disconnected curriculum implements the final and most critical attack. The attack is carried out by forcing Black boys to engage in culturally disconnected curriculum without making efforts to strengthen inadequate resources. As Black males are forced to accept a curriculum that does not reflect their cultural identity, they detach themselves from the educational environment because they do not view the educational environment fostering their academic success.

Though the issues of curriculum constraints presents as an obstacle for many educators,

teachers have the power to reject the role of destroying Black boys and accept the role of promoting their success. Professional development efforts for teachers should first focus on understanding themselves and their role in fostering positive or negative outcomes for students of color. Professional development activities should help teachers understand themselves by ensuring that “teachers think deeply about their own perspectives, privileges, beliefs, and life worlds in conjunction and contrast to the students’ communities” (Milner, 2007, p. 242). Professional development efforts must also include activities that focus on exploring thoughts and beliefs associated with viewing African American males as threats or as individuals who should be under constant surveillance. In order to improve the ways relationships are formed or not formed, professional development must address issues of fear on the parts of teachers who work with Black males. Fear can be dismantled by establishing partnerships in which young men from churches and community organizations work more closely with teachers. Establishing relationships of this nature would provide a more non-threatening environment for teachers to have more chances to work with African-American males. Professional development practices could also focus on activities that help foster open communication between teachers and students that allows each party to contribute and receive information and feedback.

In addition to providing professional development for teacher-student relationships, professional development is needed to ensure that the classroom setting serves to promote the success of Black males rather than attacking their self-esteem and self-work. Though it seems simple, many teachers do not know how to ensure that Black males are immersed in an environment that speaks of possibility rather than punishment. Palmer and Maramba (2011) provide the following recommendations for teachers committed to promoting the academic achievement of African-American males: “(1) use their classrooms as an effective forum for



combating the impact of the hidden curriculum; (2) decorate their classrooms with positive African American men and assign readings that will serve as a source of inspiration for students and encourage them to think that education is a necessary prerequisite for social and economic advancement; (3) encourage young Black professionals to come into their class to speak about their trials and tribulations and focus on their educational pathways that enabled them to get to their current positions; (4) teachers need to take an active role in facilitating their own learning about the crisis that exists for African-American males (p. 444).

Based upon the findings of my study, superintendents and administrators are not exempt from needing professional development. Superintendents would greatly benefit from the work being done by the Superintendent's Commission on Demographics and Diversity. This organization is an extension of the National Alliance of Black School Educators. A major focus of both of these organizations is the support of the academic achievement of African American through research and best practices that address their academic and cultural needs. The organizations provide resources and support for superintendents from a multitude of researchers, consultants, corporations, and educational software companies that focus on the needs of diverse learners. As superintendents begin to get the professional development they need, the tone will be set for other district office administrators and building-level administrators. As each level of administrators receive professional development, they must work together to adopt a district-level plan that will address the diverse needs of students of color in their district. This plan must be a living document that includes scheduled times to review and revise the plan based upon the students' needs. The superintendent will need to be able to articulate this plan to the Board of Education and provide them with the training needed to understand the financial impact of professional development and the allocation of financial resources needed to support the needs of

the students. The expectation is that given the appropriate level of resources, schools will no longer exist for the sole purpose of referring Black males for special education programs.

For many Black males, school serves as a reminder of their deficiencies and time in their lives filled with grief and anguish. Though few educators would willingly admit the role they played in destroying the self-esteem of Black males, many Black males have been victimized by the racist practices that exist as curriculum and school practices that do not promote their academic, social, and emotional growth, resulting in their ultimate overrepresentation in special education. Black males are predestined for placement in special education within the first four years of their educational career. Black males, more than males of any other race, are classified as inadequate, inept, and incapable of achieving academically. Within the course of their educational experiences, many Black boys internalize feelings of failure that are then perpetuated by individuals who do not have their best interests in mind. Consistent with the sentiments of some of the participants in my study, school serves as a source of embarrassment, shame, and feelings of disconnection from the school environment.

Professional development in the area of special education referrals is greatly needed. Any efforts to reform special education practices in any school district must acknowledge the fact that the evaluations and assessments used to evaluate Black children are racially biased. Referral teams must have professional development in analyzing district-wide data to determine who is being referred and why. Efforts to eliminate the overrepresentation of Black males identified as behavior disordered must focus on their needs from a scholarly perspective instead of being based on stereotypes and assumptions. Though the conversation may be uncomfortable, discussion must be held about the low expectations for student performance that have historically existed in special education classrooms.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

Without doubt, Black males exist within a double deficit. The first deficit is that they are Black and bring with them all of the negative baggage associated with a Black person in this country. The second deficit is that these misperceptions shape negative experiences for them in educational settings. In order for Black males to be recognized as intellectually gifted and educationally equipped members of society, school districts must engage in purposeful professional development that expands beyond strategies to improve high-stakes testing scores. Looking at the needs of the whole child will result in learning. As meaningful learning not based on a remedial curriculum takes place, test scores will begin to reflect the true capabilities of Black males. As opportunities for “real” instruction with the support needed to address the cultural needs of students takes place, referrals for special education will decrease.

Within the content of this recommendation section, the reader has been provided with a depth of literature and research findings regarding the plight of African-American males in this country. Lifting this research from theory to practice will require strategic will and thought-out professional development that consists of clearly articulated goals, objectives, and resources to support the academic achievement of Black males. In my experience as an educator, most of the discussion surrounding the plight of Black males in this country promotes the problems but fails to engage in the same level of attention when proposing strategies to promote their success.

Given the opportunity to present the findings of this research study as a professional development model for schools, I have relied on my experiences as an educator. The most critical component of my efforts to provide professional development requires staff members to first become aware of the cultural conditions associated with being a Black person in this country from a scholarly perspective. The intensity of the work must begin there because many teachers

are not aware of the conditions students bring to the classroom each day. I chose the words “scholarly perspective” because the research would serve to eliminate misconceptions based on assumptions and opinions. The focus of highlighting these conditions would not be to assemble excuses that justify why students do not perform but to make teachers aware of the students’ needs. In addition to exploring cultural conditions associated with being a Black person in this country, I would also highlight the importance of culture in the educational setting by introducing teachers to the concept of culturally responsive teaching pedagogy and providing opportunities for teachers to be trained in this area.

After providing teachers with embedded training and not just attending workshops on culturally responsive teaching, the next step would be to look at the curriculum to see where adjustments need to be made to ensure we were embracing and implementing teaching strategies that promote the cultural strengths of students. As we look at the areas that need to be addressed, documented efforts would be made to adjust the curriculum with opportunities built in for the school to meet and review the implementation of the strategies and data to support the students’ progress. The final step would be to work collaboratively with the school to develop a plan that identifies how we will address the needs of culturally diverse learners. This plan would consist of five critical elements: (1) identifying the needs of the students; (2) identifying the needs of the staff to ensure they have the resources and training to meet the needs of the students; (3) identifying instructional strategies that will be used to meet the needs of students by content area; (4) identifying a plan to assess what students are learning and steps to ensure all students will learn; (5) identifying a plan to incorporate parents as a part of the curriculum.

Decades of mistreatment experienced by Blacks in the educational setting suggests there is no quick fix that will ensure that Black males will achieve positive outcomes in the school

setting. The conspiracy to destroy Black boys has been so intense for so long that I offer strategies to begin to define solutions that successfully address their needs. The key to successful implementation strategies is professional development based on research instead of misperceptions and assumptions. It is my hope that after reviewing the findings and recommendations of this study, school districts will begin to reflect on their practices that lead to failure of African-American males.

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## Appendix A



### **Educational Research Study Needs to Hear Your Voice**

Research study is in need of African-American male students currently enrolled at Roosevelt Moore College that have received special education services prior to attending Roosevelt Moore College. If you would like to share your experiences in an effort to assist other African-American male high school students in pursuit of a college education, please read the information below carefully for further details.

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon is a graduate of Roosevelt Moore College and is currently a doctoral candidate at De Paul University. This study will seek to explore factors that have helped African-American males successfully transition from high school to college.

**For more information, please contact Kennedi Strickland-Dixon at 708.**

**267.5878**

## **Appendix B**

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon  
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Ocean Grove, IL 55555

Dear Dr. Gray:

I am a graduate of Roosevelt Moore College Class of 1992. During my enrollment as a student at Roosevelt Moore College, I had the opportunity to meet several individuals who inspired me to pursue an education beyond my graduation from Roosevelt Moore College. As a result of the mentoring and support I received at Roosevelt Moore College I am currently a Doctoral Candidate at De Paul University.

During my experience at Roosevelt Moore College, I had the pleasure of working for the Student Support Department under the leadership of my mentor the late Dr. Raymond Thomas. Through this position, I learned of the opportunities made for available for students with disabilities in pursuit of a college education. This experience led me to pursue a degree in special education, which ultimately has led to me serving as a special educator for the past 18 years. In addition to working under the leadership of Dr. Roosevelt Thomas, I also had the opportunity to work with the late Dr. Alice Moore as my faculty mentor in the program for first generation college students.

My experiences at Roosevelt Moore College have remained with me throughout the years and have and have helped to develop my research interests at De Paul University. I have currently been approved by IRB to conduct a research study that explores protective factors that have led African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education programs to successfully transition to college. I am seeking to conduct three interviews with four young men who meet the established criteria. As a requirement of IRB regulations, the identity of the students and the institution will remain anonymous in the completed dissertation.

Enclosed you will find a copy of my approved status with IRB and an overview of my research study. It is my hope that you, along with the Board of Trustees will approve Roosevelt Moore College as a site for me to conduct my research study.

Sincerely,

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon, 1992

Roosevelt Moore College Alumni Spotlight Recipient, 2011

## Appendix C

<b>Research Study Consent Form</b>
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### **Title of the Study**

Diagnosed but not Defeated: The Experiences of African-American Males with Past Histories of Enrollment in Special Education Programs that Successfully Attend Community College

### **Research Study**

An exploration of protective factors that lead African-American males with past histories of enrollment in special education programs to successfully transition to college.

### **Researcher**

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon, Doctoral Candidate at De Paul University  
kennedixon@gmail.com (708) 267-5878

### **Confidentiality**

The identity of each participant will remain anonymous to the readers of the final study. Each participant will be assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Audiotapes developed during the interview process will be destroyed using high density shredding equipment.

### **Participant Selection**

Participants for this study will consist of African-American male students enrolled at Triton College who meet the following criteria:

Participants must have received special education services prior to attending Roosevelt Moore College under the exceptionality of being emotionally disabled (ED/BD), cognitively disabled (CD), Learning Disabled (LD), or Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD or ADHD).

<b>Research Study Consent Form Page- 2</b>
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**Voluntary Participation**

Participation in this study is on a voluntary basis. Participants may withdraw their permission to participate at anytime. Participants will be encouraged to ask questions during the study if they are unclear about any questions. Questions will be answered as a way to ensure participants feel secure about their participation.

**Time Commitment**

Participants in the study will be asked to participate in 3 interviews. Each interview will last 30-40 minutes. All interviews will take place at Roosevelt Moore College. If the participants prefer, the interviews are scheduled at another mutually agreed upon location; the requests will be accommodated.

**Benefits of the Research Study**

This study will serve to inspire African-American males in special education programs to pursue an education beyond high school. This study will add research to a field of study that is virtually non-existent.

**Overview of the Study**

Most media coverage about African-American males often portrays negative images. In addition to the media coverage being negative, most of the research conducted in academic settings about African-American males is also negative. In a school setting, when Black males are placed in special education, it is often expected and accepted that

<b>Research Study Consent Form Page- 3</b>
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they cannot progress academically and will not pursue an education beyond high school. The purpose of this study is to hear the voices of Black males who have defied stereotypes, overcome academic adversities, and are successfully attending college. The study will consist of the researcher conducting three semi-structured interviews with each participant. Each interview will be audio-recorded using a pseudonym to protect the identity of the participant. The researcher will review the audiotapes to establish common themes and similarities among the participants that have led to their success in college. Information from the interviews will be included in the researcher's final dissertation.

### **Potential Risks of the Research Study**

Risks of this study consist of the time participants will have to devote to the study. Other potential risks consist of embarrassment participants may experience when describing some of the challenges they experienced in the educational career. Traditionally, research describing minority groups is often reported from a deficit model. Participants may experience some level of discomfort when being exposed to literature about the academic performance of African-American students. A final possible risk to consider is that participants may display some levels of stress when asked to recall their educational experiences as an individual with a disability.

### **Debriefing Session**

Participants will receive a summary of the research findings after all the data has been analyzed and composed in the format required De Paul University guidelines.

## **Appendix: D**

<b>Interview Questions</b>
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### **Interview #1- Background Information**

#### **Opening:**

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study. Your opinions and insights are greatly appreciated. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any question.

Please take as much time as you feel you may need to reflect upon your responses.

1. Please state your name and age.
2. What elementary school did you attend?
3. What high school did you attend?
4. Who do you reside with?
5. What town do you reside in?
6. Tell me about your family. How many children are in your family? Where do you fall at in terms of birth order?
7. What influenced your decision to attend Roosevelt Moore College in your pursuit of obtaining a college education?
8. Tell me a little bit about your educational goals and career plans. What are you studying at Roosevelt Moore and how would you like to ultimately embark upon a career?
9. Tell me about the services you currently utilize at Roosevelt Moore College



assist you with your classes.

10. As you read the recruitment information for the study, what influenced your decision to participate?
11. Is there anything else you would like to share that you feel will assist me with this study?

**Closing:**

Thank you for your participation today. As we close out this interview for today, I want to give you a handout to read that we will discuss during our next interview.

## **Appendix: E**

<b>Research Related to the Educational Experiences of African-American Males</b>
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**(Kunjufu, 2005)**

The plight of African-American males in this country reveals a dismal state of affairs.

**(Dancy & Brown, 2008)**

Research regarding the successful transition of African-American males from high school to a college setting suggests that the behaviors and experiences that take place in the K-12 educational setting shape their decision to pursue college.

**(Kafele, 2009)**

### **A Message for Teachers of Black Males**

As we all know, Black males in the United States have been the victims of extreme racism for generations. Your Black male students are the products of this long and difficult journey. They are the ones who carry the scars. It is imperative that you consider the consequences of racism that your students must endure, because it has a direct impact on their motivation to learn.

**(Ogbu, 1990; Labauscher, 2005; Cohen, 2010)**

One of the greatest challenges for Black boys and young men in pursuit of their

education is the ridicule from peers who have not embraced the importance of pursuing an education outside of the neighborhood. African-Americans often reject performing well in school because it is viewed by peers as acting White or selling out.

## **Appendix: F**

<b>Interview Questions</b>
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### **Interview #2- Educational Experiences**

#### **Opening:**

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study. Your opinions and insights are greatly appreciated. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any question.

Please take as much time as you feel you may need to reflect upon your responses.

1. When were you identified to receive special education services? Did you receive services for an emotional disability or cognitive delay?
2. When you think about your school experiences, what can you tell me about relationships that were established with teachers and peers and in what grades are you referencing?
3. Tell me about a time period in school you felt was the best time of your school experience. What would you attribute to that time period in your school experience?
4. Tell me about a challenging time period in your school experience. What would you attribute to that time period in your school experience?

## **5. High School Experiences**

At the high school level, students with disabilities participate in a transition process with services provided via their IEP. The transition process consists of teachers and staff writing goals throughout your high school years to help prepare you for college and life after high school. In addition to writing goals, a transition meeting happens prior to graduation. The purpose of the transition meeting is to review your progress, write goals to address your needs beyond college, and connect you with resources needed to address your needs after graduation.

Take a moment to think about your transition process in high school.

Describe for me what your transition process consisted of. As you think about your IEP meetings related to your transition process, what do you find to be most helpful with what you are pursuing now at Roosevelt Moore College?

6. If you could provide feedback to your former teachers and counselors at your former high school about your transition process, what would you say?
7. You have provided me with information about your school experiences in kindergarten through twelfth grade. As you reviewed the handout on research related to African-American males, I would like to get your thoughts and feedback. As we review the statements together, do you agree or disagree with the statement? What are your thoughts?

## **Research Related to African-American Males**

**(Kunjufu, 2005)**

The plight of African-American males in this country reveals a dismal state of affairs.

**(Dancy & Brown, 2008)**

Research regarding the successful transition of African-American males from high school to a college setting suggests that the behaviors and experiences that take place in the K-12 educational setting shape their decision to pursue college.

**(Kafele, 2009)**

### **A Message for Teachers of Black Males**

As we all know, Black males in the United States have been the victims of extreme racism for generations. Your Black male students are the products of this long and difficult journey. They are the ones who carry the scars. It is imperative that you consider the consequences of racism that your students must endure, because they have a direct impact on their motivation to learn.

**(Ogbu, 1990; Labauscher, 2005; Cohen, 2010)**

One of the greatest challenges for Black boys and young men in pursuit of their education is the ridicule from peers who have not embraced the importance of pursuing an education outside of the neighborhood. African Americans often reject

performing well in school because it is viewed by peers as acting white or selling out.

**Closing:**

Thank you for your participation today. Are there any areas related to education that I did not cover today that you feel will help to strengthen my study?

## **Appendix: G**

### **Interview Questions**

#### **Interview #3- Family and Community Involvement**

##### **Opening:**

Thank you for agreeing to be a part of my research study. Your opinions and insights are greatly appreciated. Please feel free to ask me to repeat any question. Please take as much time as you feel you may need to reflect upon your responses.

1. Research suggests that in Black homes, the family structure serves as an engine that promotes successful choices. Do you agree or disagree with this statement? Tell me a little about your family's involvement in selecting Roosevelt Moore College.
2. Outside of your family members, are there other individuals who have assisted you with your decisions and plans to attend college?
3. Does your enrollment in college serve to continue a legacy of college students in your family, or are you the first member of your family to attend college?
4. Have you been involved in any kind of community outreach programs such as mentoring or tutoring?
5. Are you currently involved in any community programs to assist you with maintaining your enrollment in college?



6. Are there any questions you feel should be added to my study?

Closing:

This concludes our three interviews. Thank you for your participation. I will be scheduling a follow-up session with you to share the final findings of my study.



Office of Research Protections  
Institutional Review Board  
1 East Jackson Boulevard  
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2201  
312-362-7593  
Fax: 312-362-7574

Research Involving Human Subjects  
**NOTICE OF INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD ACTION**

**To:** Kennedy Strickland-Dixon, Graduate Student, College of Education  
Horace Hall, Ph.D., Faculty Sponsor, College of Education

**Date:** November 13, 2012

**Re:** Research Protocol #KS091012EDU  
"Diagnosed But Not Defeated: The Experiences of African American Males with Past Histories of Enrollment in Special Education that Successfully Attend Community College"

Please review the following important information about the review of your proposed research activity.

Review Details

- |   |  |
|---|--|
| <input type="checkbox"/> Full Committee Review                            | <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Original Review    |
| <input checked="" type="checkbox"/> Expedited Review, under 45 CFR 46.110 | <input type="checkbox"/> Continuing Review (Renewal)   |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Amendment                     |
|   | <input type="checkbox"/> Incident Report/Adverse Event |

Your research meets the criteria for expedited review under the following category(ies):

Category of Review: 6, 7

"(6) Collection of data from voice, video, digital, or image recordings made for research purposes."

"(7) Research on individual or group characteristics or behavior (including, but not limited to, research on perception, cognition, motivation, identity, language, communication, cultural beliefs or practices, and social behavior) or research employing survey, interview, oral history, focus group, program evaluation, human factors evaluation, or quality assurance methodologies."

Approval Details

- ☐ Approved      ☒ Approved (Previous contingencies have been resolved.)

Review Date: November 13, 2012

Approval Period: November 13, 2012 – November 12, 2013

Consent Documents: #12-295, Version 11/2/2012, Pre-Screening Questionnaire (enclosed)  
#12-296, Version 11/2/2012, Adult Consent (enclosed)

- ☒ Waiver of Documentation of Consent, applicable to #12-295  
☒ Alteration(s) of Consent/Assent (verbal description over phone prior to pre-screening questionnaire), applicable to #12-295

Number of approved participants: 4

Funding Agency: None

Performance sites: DePaul University

Reminders

- Only the most recent IRB-approved versions of assent/consent forms may be used in association with this project.
- Any changes to the funding source or funding status must be sent to the IRB as an amendment.
- Prior to implementing revisions to project materials or procedures, you must submit an amendment application detailing the changes to the IRB for review and receive notification of approval.
- You must promptly report any problems that have occurred involving research participants to the IRB in writing.
- If your project will continue beyond the approval period, you are responsible for submitting a request for renewal to the IRB at least 3 weeks prior to the expiration date. The renewal form can be downloaded from the IRB web page at <http://research.depaul.edu>.
- **Once the research is completed, you must send a final report closing the research to the IRB.**

The Board would like to thank you for your efforts and cooperation and wishes you the best of luck on your research. If you have any questions, please contact me by telephone at (312) 362-7497 or by email at [jordman@depaul.edu](mailto:jordman@depaul.edu).

For the Board,



Jennifer Ordman  
Assistant Director of Research Compliance  
Office of Research Protections in the Office of Research Services  
DePaul University  
1 East Jackson Blvd.  
Chicago, IL 60604

Office Location: 14 E. Jackson Blvd., Suite 1030



Institutional Review Board  
1 East Jackson Boulevard  
Chicago, Illinois 60604-2201  
312/362-7593  
FAX: 312/362-7574

## **CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH**

### **Diagnosed but not Defeated: The Experiences of African American Males with Past Histories of Enrollment in Special Education that Successfully Attend Community College**

#### **What is the purpose of this research?**

You are being asked to be in a research study because I am trying to learn more about the experiences of African American males with past histories of enrollment in special education that have successfully attended a community college. The focus of the study is to explore protective factors that have promoted resiliency in some African American males leading to their ability to overcome educational adversities and to successfully pursue a college education. The goal of the study is to produce more successful post-school outcomes for African American males by exploring factors that have led to their academic success. You are invited to participate in this study because you received special education services prior to enrolling in college. Participants selected for the study must be African American males ages 18-25 with past histories of enrollment in special education programs that are currently enrolled at Triton College. This study is being conducted by Kennedy Strickland-Dixon, a doctoral student at DePaul University.

#### **How much time will this take?**

This study will take about two hours of your times. The study will consist of three interviews. Each interview will last approximately 30 minutes. In preparation for the second interview, participants will be asked to review a handout that explores literature regarding the educational status of African American males in this country. In addition to each interviewing session, an additional 10 minutes will be set aside to address any questions or concerns each participant may have.

#### **What will I be asked to do if I agree to participate in this study?**

If you agree to be in this study, you will be asked to participate in three interviews. Each interview will consist of a set of predetermined questions. The questions will consist of gaining knowledge about your basic background information, educational experiences, and community and family involvement. Each interview will be recorded on an audio tape and transcribed later to ensure an accurate record of what you shared during the interview.

#### **What are the risks involved in participating in this study?**



The risks associated with this study are minimal. The risks of this study consist of the time participants will have to devote to the study. Other potential risks consist of embarrassment participants may experience when describing some of the challenges they experienced in their educational career. Participants may experience some level of discomfort when being exposed to literature about the academic performance of African American students. A final possible risk to consider is that participants may display some levels of stress when asked to recall their educational experiences as an individual with a disability. At any point in the interview, you can stop or skip any questions that make you feel uncomfortable.

**What are the benefits of my participation in this study?**

You will not personally benefit from being in this study. However, it is my hope that the study will serve as vehicle to give voice to the stories of African American males who have defied adversities, demonstrated resilience, and have successfully attended college. Literature describing these kinds of experiences is virtually non-existent. Information gained from the study will help educators, community outreach programs, and professionals in higher education with efforts to strengthen programs that assist African American males with attending college.

**Can I decide not to participate? If so, are there other options?**

Yes, you can choose not to participate. Participation in the study is completely voluntary. If you agree to be in the study now, you can change your mind later and leave the study at anytime. If you decide to participate and change your mind later, you will not be penalized in any way.

**How will the confidentiality of the research records be protected?**

The records of this study will remain confidential. For confidentiality purposes, you will be given a pseudo name that will not be similar to your actual name in way. In any report I might publish, I will not include any information that will identify you. Research records will be stored securely and I will be the only researcher that will have access to the records that identify you by name. Some people might review my records in order to make sure I am doing what I am supposed to. For example, the DePaul University Institutional Review Board and/or the Data and Safety Monitoring Board. At the beginning of each interview and throughout the duration of the interview, you will be referred to by your "pseudo" name. The audio tapes from the video will be sent to a company that will transcribe the information presented in the interviews. Upon completion of the study, audio tapes, notes, and all materials related to the identity and responses from the participants will be shredded using a high density shredder.

**Whom can I contact for more information?**

If you have questions about this study, please contact Kennedi Strickland- Dixon at 708.267.5878 or by email at [kennedidixon@gmail.com](mailto:kennedidixon@gmail.com). If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact Susan Loess-Perez, DePaul University's Director of Research Protections at 312-362-7593 or by email at [sloesspe@depaul.edu](mailto:sloesspe@depaul.edu).

***You will be given a copy of this information to keep for your records.***

**Statement of Consent:**

I have read the above information. I have all my questions answered. (Check one:)

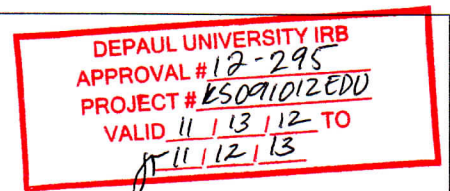
☐ I consent to be in this study.

☐ I **DO NOT** consent to be in this study.

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Printed name: \_\_\_\_\_



### Pre-Screening Questionnaire:

This study will seek to explore factors that have helped African American males with past histories of receiving special education services successfully transition to college. This study consists of three confidential interviews, reading literature, and participating in a follow-up session. To qualify for this research study, I will have to ask you 3 pre-screening questions. Do you agree to allow me to ask you the qualifying questions?

Yes ☐ NO ☐

1. Are you currently enrolled in at least once class at Triton College?

Yes ☐ NO ☐

2. Are you an African-American Male between the ages of 18-25?

Yes ☐ NO ☐

3. Have you received special education services prior to attending Triton College?

Yes ☐ NO ☐

*If they answer no to any of the questions: "Thank you for your time but unfortunately you do not qualify for the research at this time."*

*If they answer yes to all the questions: "Thank you. You qualify to participate in this study, would you like to schedule an interview at this time?"*



## Appendix B

DEPAUL UNIVERSITY IRB
APPROVAL #
PROJECT # <u>KS091012EDU</u>
VALID <u>11</u> / <u>13</u> / <u>12</u> TO
<u>11</u> / <u>12</u> / <u>13</u>



### **Educational Research Study Needs to Hear Your Voice**

Research study is in need of African American male students currently enrolled at Triton College that have received special education services prior to attending college. This study will seek to explore factors that have helped African American males with past histories of receiving special education services successfully transition to college. If you would like to share your experiences in an effort to assist other African American male high school students in pursuit of a college education, please read the information below carefully for further details.

#### **Interested participants must meet the following criteria:**

- African American males ages 18-25.
- Participants must have received special education services prior to attending Triton College.
- Participants must currently be enrolled in at least one class at Triton College.

#### **Interested participants are being recruited for the purpose of research and will be asked to participate in the following activities:**

- Participate in three confidential audio-recorded interviews lasting 30-45 minutes on campus or at a local library near the campus.
- Read a handout with literature that conveys the academic status of African American males.
- Participate in a 30 minute follow- up session that will allow each participant to review the information provided in their interviews.

Information gained through the interviews will remain confidential. Participation in the research study is voluntary and can be revoked at any time.

Kennedi Strickland-Dixon is a graduate of Triton College and is currently a doctoral candidate at De Paul University.

**For more information, please contact Kennedi Strickland-Dixon at 708. 267.5878 or at [kennedidixon@gmail.com](mailto:kennedidixon@gmail.com).**

*Version Date- 10.21.12*

*Protocol #KS091012EDU*